Original

# MAD MAX

When the gangs take over the highways... pray he's still out there somewhere.

# MAD MAX

## BY TERRY KAYE

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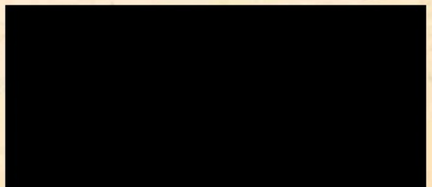


A Roadshow release.

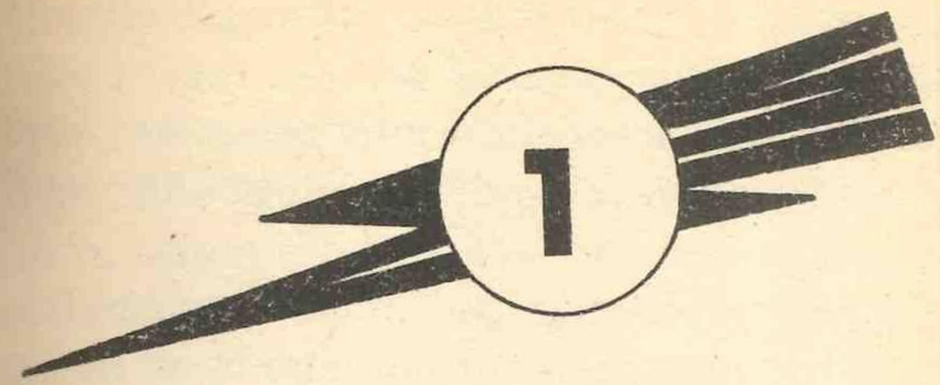
Produced by Byron Kennedy

Screenplay by George Miller and James McCauseland

Directed by George Miller

Starring Mel Gibson

Featuring Joanne Samuel, Steve Bisley,
Tim Burns, Roger Ward, and Hugh Keayes-Byrne.




The road lay like a ribbon carefully stretched across the sparse, barren landscape. Six lanes in either direction, separated by a no-man's land of brown gravel, empty cans and scraps of paper, it sliced through what had once been rich, expensive grazing land. The cattle that once roamed the area, when the road was little more than a country lane, were long since gone — victims of a society which now relied on laboratory-produced proteins for nourishment, and fast-food pulp for taste. The few animals surviving when the last of the graziers had walked off their land to find work on the production lines had long ago been picked off by the Armalite Gangs — peculiar, fearsome groups of young men, named for the high-powered rifles they carried in racks along the rear windows of their super-charged pick-up trucks.

Because this particular road had been the first of the super-highways constructed by the Central Bureaucracy, it had become a favourite haunt of

the Armalite Gangs. Every Friday night, after clocking off from their mindless jobs in the useless factories which threatened to suffocate almost every city with vast palls of smoke, they would battle through the chaos of the inter-urban freeways and break for the freedom of the Transcontinental One.

Stereo systems blaring and engines screaming, they'd throw their pick-ups hundreds of miles through the night to rendezvous at a spot far away from the terrors of the cities. Once out there, surrounded by nothing more than the black tarmac and the blighted landscape, they'd set about systematically creating their own kind of terror.

First it had been the mangy cattle. When they were disposed of their targets became the massive road trains barrelling down the Transcon One at close to a hundred miles an hour. Some enterprising gang member had hit upon the idea that a carefully arranged cross-fire could knock out enough of the steel-toughened tyres to send the unfortunate rig off the road and into the scrub. Crashing at that speed, the impact generally sent the driver and his companions off to eternity. The Armalite Gangs – often with thirty or forty pick-ups – had found it not only great fun but a useful way to supplement their incomes. Like the wreckers of Penzance who, centuries before, had guided ships to their destruction and then pillaged the wrecks, the Armalite Gangs would strip the road-trains bare in a matter of hours, stowing tons of merchandise beneath tarpaulins in the back of their small rigs, then disappearing into the night to plan



their next attack.

The combination of profit and excitement proved attractive. The number of gangs grew. The rig drivers – many of whom used the large cabin of their prime-mover as a mobile home for their family – learnt the law of the road in the early days when one of their colleagues survived the initial crash. As he crawled from the wreck he provided one more target for the gathering vultures.

The drivers took to travelling with a small arsenal within reach and, mounted along the top of their rigs, massive spotlights which were capable of turning the road and the area on either side into broad daylight. Of course the searing glare from the lights played havoc with oncoming traffic, but the first rule that anyone learnt on Transcon One was survival.

However, the most effective deterrent against the Armalite Gangs had little to do with the drivers themselves. After the massive All National Retail Corporation declared Transcon One off-limits to all its rigs, the cost of consumer goods soared throughout the country. The public outcry was so loud that the Central Bureaucracy, meeting in emergency session, authorised the establishment of an elite group of highway patrol cops whose sole function was to destroy the Armalite Gangs by any means at their disposal. Their name – The Breaker Squad – was coined by the Controller himself, the head of the Central Bureaucracy, who demanded that his ministers "break the stranglehold which was choking Transcontinental One".

The police had moved swiftly. Within their own ranks they found a large number of young men who had the necessary qualifications: a love of fast cars and hard driving, combined with the cunning and disregard for life necessary to beat the Armalite Gangs at their own game. They took these men from all over the country and sent them to a two-week camp where they were forced to push themselves and their specially equipped cars beyond all conceivable limits. Eleven out of the hundred recruits discovered their limits and were dead by the time the course was over — their cars shattered, and their bodies smashed, beyond recognition. After that, ten days of training with the Special Commando Task Force, learning their brutal form of unarmed combat, and a week on the firing range seemed like child's play.

The Breaker Squad, in forty modified police compacts with crude but effective armour plating, long-range tanks and V-8s which could put them over 150 miles an hour without protest, met the first of the Armalite Gangs just before 2 am on a Saturday morning on the Transcon, not far from where Max — Mad Max to his friends — now stood beside his police pursuit car.

Police Intelligence had informed the Squad that thirty or more Armalite Rigs were planning to leave Expocity, 320 miles to the north, for a series of major 'hits' along a section of the Transcon that cut through a jumble of low rugged hills. A police reconnaissance plane using classified infra-red tracking equipment had picked them up without any difficulty and radioed their rendezvous position to the chief of the Breaker Squad. Working to plan, the police allowed the gang their first 'kill', then barrelled in on them while they were stripping the wreck.



The speed and strength of the police took the gang members completely by surprise. Most of them were congregated around the wreck, more than fifty yards from their rigs, and their first instinct when the police arrived, bathing the whole scene in searchlights, was to make a break for their pick-ups. The commanding voice of the Chief through P.A. ordered them not to move. Two shots quickly pinned down one of the gang who disobeyed. It was enough to convince most of the thirty or so larrikins that they were playing right out of their league.

One of the gang standing next to his rig managed to get in and start the engine — only to have his front tyres shot out before he could even attempt crashing through one of the police road-blocks. Five other gang members, with two rifles between them, crouched behind the wreck. A cop stationed with binoculars on a nearby hill radioed a warning. They were ordered into the open by the Chief.

And that, to the disappointment of most of the Squad, was that. Less excitement than you'd find while patrolling any of a hundred streets in Expocity after midnight. Or before, come to that.

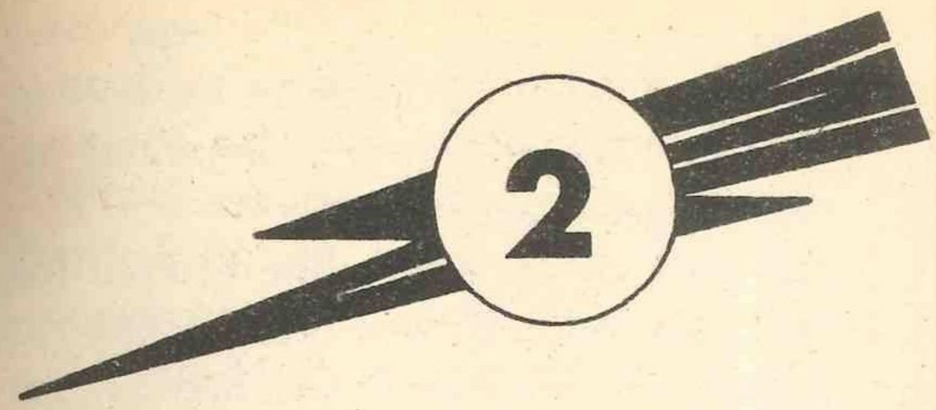
But after that first easy victory the Breaker Squad had more than its share of action. Other gangs quickly became aware of the existence of the elite police force, and never, in the eight months it took to eradicate the gangs after that first raid, did

the cops take them by surprise or without a fight.

The police were forced to split into small, more vulnerable groups in order to cover all the most dangerous spots along the length of the Transcon. The gangs posted look-outs before they even thought of trying a 'hit', and the police would find themselves playing a supercharged cat-and-mouse game for weeks on end. On at least two occasions small groups of cop cars were ambushed.

The gang members were never a match for the speed and ferocity of the quickly battle-hardened Breaker Squad, but by the time the last of the gangs had decided it was safer to stalk the streets of the cities, only 62 of the original squad of 89 which had taken to the road had survived. One of them was Mad Max.






It was only 6 am but Max was already on to his fourth cigarette of the day. He flicked the ash from it and slammed the door of his black Police Interceptor closed before walking slowly to the front of the car and lifting his buttocks onto the bonnet. He gazed down the black length of the Transcon to a spot about half a mile away where, almost seven years ago as a brash and smart 18-year-old, he'd shot out the tyres of the Armalite rig during that first bust.

"The best shot that damn Squad ever had," he joked aloud.

"The only thing that mattered on the road then," he thought to himself. "That and being as tough and cunning as those bastards.

"Still tough, still cunning, but I wouldn't want to count too much on my skill with the hardware. Too old for that – too old to go running around the countryside getting involved in all that guerilla warfare crap."

He continued out loud again: "Let 'em go, keep your head on your shoulders and go swimming. That's the only motto that'll get you into your thirties, Max," he said with a laugh as he walked back to the car, opened the door and pulled his towel off the passenger's seat.

He began to walk down the incline toward the river, hesitated a second and then returned to the car. He leaned on the door and switched on the police radio, turning the volume up full.

"Once a cop, always a cop, that's what they say," he muttered, heading for the river and welcome relief from the heat, already beginning to quiver across the asphalt of Transcon One.

Max was well out into mid-stream, alternately duck-diving and stroking out against the current when the first of that day's all points broadcasts blared from his radio: "All units, sections eighteen to thirty, Transcon One — two offenders now entering your area. Presently pursued at high speed by Highway Patrol vehicle. Wanted on charges including grievous bodily harm to police officer. Approach with extreme caution. Offenders have already seriously damaged four police cars and avoided two roadblocks. Descriptions to follow."

Max had barely broken stroke as the message crackled across the water, but he'd heard enough to realise that another bored car-crazy kid had decided on what the cops had come to know as a Big Run — a wild chase along the Transcon One in which the kid behind the wheel of his over-powered V-8 pitted all his driving skill, courage and cunning against the massed strength and



resources of the Highway Patrol.

It was a game which had been played often enough for Max to guess exactly what had happened. The kid would have prepared himself well several hundred miles to the south, tuning his car, fitting special road tyres, loading the gas tanks to the full and popping enough amphetamines to make sure he got the right buzz going in his head. He would then have headed out on to Transcon One, all the time twiddling the dial on his radio monitor until he picked up the frequency used by the Highway Patrol in that area — after all, half the fun of a 'Big Run' was to listen in on the mayhem and frustration you were causing and then taunt the cops with your CB. After that, with all the preparations made, it was just a matter of making contact — defying speed restrictions through the sleepy townships or forcing some day-tripper off the road. The game ended when either the police managed to corner him, he crashed, his car blew up or he made it through sections eighteen to thirty on the Transcon One and crossed the State Line.

Although, years before, the Central Bureaucracy had established the nation-wide police force, they'd allowed the prosecution of offenders to remain in the hands of the States. Max, like every other cop, knew that if you arrested a person in one State and charged him with crimes committed in another, then all you succeeded in doing was enmeshing yourself in a maze of legal technicalities and conflicting statutes which almost invariably ended with the case being thrown out of court.

Sections eighteen to thirty of the Transcon-

tinental Highway One were eighty miles of super-highway overrun by freight rigs, speed-mad larrikins, hot-as-hell tow trucks and patrolled by a handful of young cops in overwhelmingly over-powered pursuit cars. Sections eighteen to thirty-one — four years in a row it could boast more fatalities for every kilometre than any other super-highway in the country. Sections eighteen to thirty-one — the last blast for the kids who elected to make the Big Run; and right now there were two out there who'd done better than most. Just eighty miles to go; one crippled cop car in pursuit, two more police units waiting to try cutting them off. And Mad Max.

Max dived towards the bottom for the last time, surfaced and struck out for the shore. Slowly, he walked out of the river and up the embankment, the water streaming from his head and down his powerful shoulders. He picked up his towel as the radio began to crackle out the descriptions:

"Further to all points broadcast. Description of wanted offenders as follows. Note that offenders are using a stolen police pursuit vehicle."

"Oh, shit," Max muttered to himself. "Someone's going to have a nasty time trying to explain that to the Chief. Our runner must have blown up his own unit and then outsmarted some fool cop. Back to the city beat for him, the bloody idiot. No wonder our friend's doing so well."

Max felt the first thrill of the chase start to pump through him. He pulled the towel from his hair to listen to the rest of the broadcast.



"Driver identified as Bryson Williams, describing himself as the Nightrider. Aged 19, with both criminal and juvenile record, including robbery with violence, break, enter and steal, malicious damage and three counts of assault with a knife. Long list of motoring offences and known to be a highly competent driver. Repeating earlier warning to all units — approach with extreme caution. He is in possession of a police-issue high-velocity rifle and a police-issue 12-shot pistol."

Max let out a laugh of derision. "Oh great, he's not only got a car, but we've armed him as well. And then they wonder why we find it hard to grab 'em before they reach the line."

The voice went on: "Williams is accompanied by an unidentified female. Aged about 15 and dressed in white t-shirt, blue jeans and high-heeled shoes. Long brown hair, parted in middle. Offenders travelling at high speed and now estimated to be entering section nineteen. All units within target area are ordered to make every attempt to apprehend offenders before the State line."

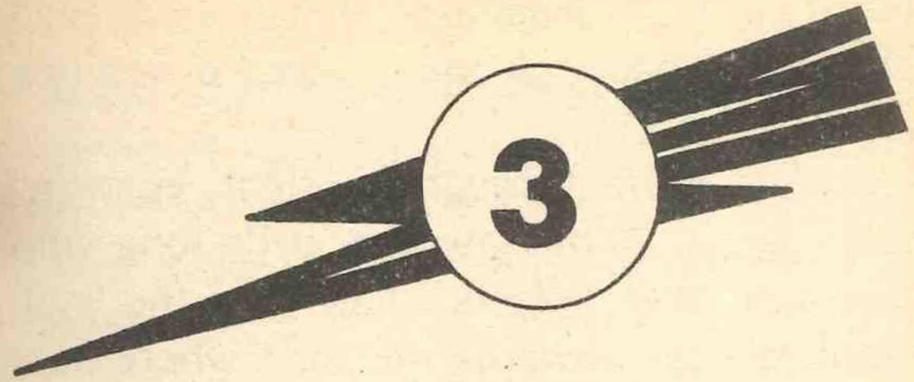
The radio crackled off while the operator took a break before continuing with his lists of stolen vehicles, descriptions of wanted men and the other paraphernalia which Max had long ago given up taking any notice of.

"All units," he sneered to himself. "There's only Roop and Charlie in the pursuit car, Jim Goose, who's such a yahoo he should have got a mentally defective certificate instead of an 1100 cc police bike, and me."

At twenty-five Max was the oldest – and the best – of the cops whose job it was to patrol the Transcon One. He was what the Chief called a "magic pursuit cop" who could combine remarkable driving skills, cunning and downright violence, when needed, with an overriding desire to preserve his own life. He was never guilty of the sheer recklessness and stupidity which wasted the lives of many young cops behind the wheel on Transcon One. For this reason the Chief himself had ordered Max into the last line of defence before the State Line. If anyone could grab the larrikins who turned the Transcon One into an adventureland for the demented before they made it to freedom, it was Max. His was, the Chief often thought, a special kind of madness. He could drive himself – and his car – harder and tougher than any cop the Chief had ever known, but it wasn't part of the ignorance and foolishness which characterised so many of the do-or-die daredevils and simple-minded boy racers who ended up on his force. The Chief, like Max, had realised a long time ago that if most of them hadn't decided to pull on the blue uniform and become a "bronze", as the louts and hoons called them, then they'd be out there fooling with cycle gangs or planning for a Big Run themselves.

Max had once been like that too. But he'd been good enough, smart enough and quick enough as a young cop to survive on the road. And then he'd met Jessie. He'd lived with her for four years now, and two years ago Sprog, his son, had been born. Unlike most of the other cops on the Transcon and all of the crazies they had to contend with, Max was no longer set to self-destruct.






Sixty miles down the road, Roop and Charlie had also heard the all points broadcast.

Charlie had been asleep in the back seat of the car when the first part of the message had crackled across his radio. Roop had been settled for half an hour behind a tree stump sixty or seventy yards away, holding a high-powered rifle with a massive telescopic sight to his shoulder. At first he had cracked off a few careless shots at a couple of crows that had come within range; then, across the valley, he saw a late-model sedan bump its way down a rarely used side-road. He picked it up through his sight, carefully making adjustments until he had it razor sharp in the lens and saw, with mounting interest, that the car contained a teenage couple. Slowly the car pulled to a stop and he saw the boy get out of the driver's seat carrying a travelling rug, while the girl, wearing a pretty, off-the-shoulder, sun-frock, quickly stooped through her door and ran round the front of the car to link her

arm through his. They scrambled down off the road, kicking up a shower of rocks and dust as they made their way through what had once been a carefully tended paddock and climbed over a low stone wall.

Roop tracked them through his sight, enjoying the exercise more as he saw the girl's long sun-tanned legs and large breasts. Once over the wall, the guy looked back towards the road where he'd left his car, obviously satisfied himself that they couldn't be seen by any passing traffic, and spread the rug on the ground. Quickly he took off his shirt, kicked off his shoes and, putting his arms around the girl, pulled her down on the rug with him.

Roop crouched, muscles alert, eyes straining and the barrel of the rifle held firmly on the tree stump. To his annoyance, it was difficult to see exactly what was going on through the tangle of legs and arms, but after several minutes he saw the white triangle of the girl's panties as the guy hoisted her dress up round her waist. After several more minutes' groping he saw them disentangle themselves and stand up. The girl put her hands round her neck and shook out her hair before pulling her bodice down to expose her breasts. She slipped out of the dress, letting it fall in a heap at her feet. Wearing only her pants, she bent over, picked it up, folded it neatly and laid it down on the corner of the rug. Her partner meanwhile had quickly pulled off his jeans, hopping around on one leg, then stepped out of his underpants. Roop zeroed in on his crutch and satisfied himself that



the guy was ready to perform just as the girl took a step towards him and put her arms around his chest. Roop saw, with barely controllable excitement, that he was slipping his hand down the inside of her pants, exposing her bare buttocks to his view. Gradually he pulled her pants down until they were around her knees and bent his head to begin kissing her breasts.

Just at that crucial moment for both the couple and Roop, Charlie dragged himself out of the pursuit car.

"Hey Roop," Charlie called to him. "Roop, we gotta Big Run on our hands."

Roop tried to ignore him, but the sound had already carried through the warm morning air and across the valley to the couple, who turned, trying to discover where it had come from. Both Charlie and the cop car were hidden from their sight by a fold in the land.

Getting no answer, Charlie began again: "C'mon Roop, stop fooling, will ya. This sounds serious."

Roop swore to himself and cursed the day he'd ever chosen to drive tango with Charlie. He wished that Charlie would shut up; that the couple would renew their love-making.

Any hope of that was shattered in the next few seconds when Charlie set off the 'yip-yip-yip' of the police siren. The couple, already wary, needed no more encouragement. They scampered to pick up their clothes and dashed back up the hill to their car; only pausing occasionally, as though trying to work out what was going on.

In frustration, Roop aimed the rifle at the sky and sent two shots towards heaven before jogging back to the pursuit car. Charlie had already gunned the motor and opened the passenger side door; but Roop, swinging the rifle at his side by the trigger guard, walked around to the driver's side.

Charlie was holding the radio mike to his mouth, talking to March Hare, the code name for the pursuit vehicle trailing the Nightrider: "March Hare, how far off the intersection of Anarchie Road and the Transcon are you?"

"About four minutes travelling very fast. Can you make it to attempt an intercept?"

"It'll be close, March Hare. We're moving out now."

Roop began to open the driver's door. "Of course we're gonna make it. Now move over and let me drive."

"Oh, no, not this again," Charlie said with a whine rasping the edge of his voice. "I've been assigned, Roop, you know that. I've been ordered to drive. We'll both get busted for it. The order said that you can't drive under any circumstances except if I'm inca . . . incapacitated."

Roop grabbed Charlie's shoulder through the now open door and, pushing his face close to Charlie's, said: "You'll be incapacitated — to say nothing of seriously injured — if you don't get your arse across the seat."

Just then the voice of March Hare stopped them both: "We gotta nail this hoon. He's creating heavy damage. Just been informed on the other channel that the cop he smashed up to get the car has died.



How much longer will ya be?"

Roop put all his weight against Charlie's shoulder and shoved him bodily onto the centre console while grabbing the mike out of his hand: "Two, two-and-a-half minutes maybe. We'll nail him."

Roop was behind the wheel, engaging the engine and spinning the tyres before Charlie could settle himself in the passenger's seat. His door was swinging wildly as Roop fish-tailed the car up the road, punishing the engine and threatening to blow the pistons through the bonnet.

Charlie grabbed hold of the door, hurled it closed and turned to Roop. "There'll be shit to pay for this. It's not just you that'll end up patrolling some tenement city. It'll be me too."

"Jesus H. Christ — and Saint Alphonso into the bargain — will you shut up and start checking the hardware. This could call for some help from the cop's best friend."

"Cut it out Roop. You know I don't like the Lord's name being taken in vain."

Roop, who'd had long and tedious experience of what he considered his partner's strange religious beliefs, mimicked Charlie's reply to a tee.

"Cut it out, will ya," Charlie whined. "And for God's sake watch where you're going."

Roop, tramping hard on the accelerator, hit a nasty ditch on the road at better than a hundred miles an hour, and it was more through luck than any driving ability that they'd managed to stay on the bitumen. But to Roop's credit — or perhaps as a testament to his foolishness — he didn't lift his foot off the pedal. He kept the pursuit car barrel-

ling down the road, kicking up a huge storm of dust behind, heading for the intersection with Transcon One.

Charlie took the mike off the stand on the dashboard. "March Hare, what state you in?"

"Burning a lot of oil, overheating badly. We're about twenty yards behind him. It's ton up at the moment, about a minute-and-a-half from the intersection."

"What's his form, March Hare?"

Oh, a real sweetheart. Went berserk in Sun City about eighteen hours ago but the uppers are keep-him fresh as a daisy. He's rammed us once — we've been with him about eight hours — and we're pretty smashed up round the front fender. Got a nice gash down the passenger's side too that'll prove whether those so-called panel beaters at HQ are as good as they say they are."

"You seen our friend close-up, March Hare?"

"Sure, we got alongside him a few hours back, but his lady friend put the nose of a rifle out the window and that was that. He's a real orangutang. You know, the Big Run down damnation valley . . . all hopped up . . . crazy eyes . . . terminal psychotic. You guys gonna make it . . . this rig ain't gonna last much longer?"

Roop called across the car: "'Course we're gonna make it, you just sit tight."

As Charlie clicked off the mike he muttered almost to himself, "It's gonna be close, Roop, real close."

"Shut up will ya," Roop commanded as Charlie caught the first sight of Transcon One off to the



right — the direction from which the Nightrider and the car on his tail would come.

Almost immediately he began yelling: "There they are, coming round that curve. Hell, look at that smoke. March Hare's gonna blow up."

Roop gave it everything he could and, much as he would have liked to steal a glance at the road, he dared not take his eyes off the dirt he was burning up beneath the tyres.

The two police cars looked like they were locked together and Charlie sat fascinated for a second. "C'mon Roop, rip the guts outta her. C'mon hot shot."

Charlie leant over the back seat and pulled a short-barrelled pump action shot-gun out of a vinyl case: "All loaded up and ready to go. Yeeehaaaa!"

"March Hare here. We're half a mile off Anarchie Road intersection. Can you see us?"

"We gotcha March Hare. Meet ya there."

As Charlie returned the mike to its rest the CB radio crackled to life: "This is the Nightrider. I'd just like to welcome y'aboard. Woooeee. Born with a steerin' wheel in his hand and an accelerator strapped to his boot, the Nightrider's gonna show you all about a Big Run. I'm just glidin' at the speed of fright . . . and I ain't comin' back." There was a high-pitched cackle which Charlie and Roop assumed was a laugh, and then the radio went dead.

"Oh c'mon Roop, c'mon. I wanna waste this tin-arsed flookie."

The Nightrider's voice boomed out once more, just as Roop and Charlie hurtled across the inter-

section. In a mock sports commentary style he began: "The kid slaps it into second. Skids momentarily, straightens her up, puts it flat to the boards again.

"His head's in Heaven. He bobs, he weaves, he feints, he ducks the law. The game's heatin' up again but there ain't no match for the Nightrider."

At that moment, the Nightrider, with March Hare hard on his exhaust, and the pursuit car manned by Charlie and Roop converged on the intersection at better than one hundred miles an hour. At that sort of speed, the time to make a decision is gone before a person even realises he has to make one. It all just came down to reaction, and Roop's reaction was to break hard and swing his wheel hard to the right to take the Nightrider head-on. Charlie, completely unprepared for the manoeuvre, was thrown hard up against the passenger door, losing his grip on the shot-gun and smacking his shoulder into the window pillar. Quickly he tried to recover, swearing as he pulled the short-barrelled gun up from between his legs squirmed his body round to get a line of fire down the side of the car.

The Nightrider was relying on nothing more than reactions either. He swung his wheel to the left, as Roop hurtled at an angle out of the intersection, and then straightened up just enough to sideswipe the cop car. In the moment before the collision Charlie managed to get off one wild shot, but the full impact of the blast was absorbed by the front fender and grille of the Nightrider's vehicle.



The sound of the tearing metal was a kind of overture for what happened in the next few heart-stopping moments. By nothing more than a quirk of luck, the force of the impact threw Roop to the left, taking the steering wheel in that direction and sending the car away from the Nightrider across two lanes, over an embankment, through a sign-post and out of control up a slight grade. March Hare was in much more trouble. The cop behind the wheel found himself hard on the tail of the Nightrider, who, because of the impact, had his speed dramatically reduced. To avoid ramming the Nightrider at more than a ton, the cop began to throw his car to the right, only to find Roop coming straight for him. In an amazing feat of driving, he crashed his foot onto the brake pedal and threw the car the other way, using the momentum of the skid to graze past Roop's terrified face. Luckily, the Nightrider seized his advantage, hammered his foot on the accelerator and gave enough clearance for March Hare's car to miss his rear.

March Hare managed to straighten up before running off the road and then began to limp off — yet again — in pursuit.

Roop and Charlie's car had come to rest in a blaze of dust by the time March Hare could pick up his mike: "You OK?" Silence. "You guys OK there?"

Finally, the tired voice of Roop crackled across the increasing distance: "Yeah, we're OK. Just keep going for Chrissake."

"We're going, we're going," came the reply.

Roop clambered out of the car, piling abuse on

Charlie, cursing the first day he'd ever seen him. "You coulda blasted him from here to eternity, blockhead. But, oh no, not our Charlie. Too damn scared, hands shaking too damn much."

Charlie had moved into the driver's seat, trying to kick the engine over as Roop walked round to the front of the car and, in a frenzy of frustration, ripped the mangled bonnet off its remaining hinge and thew it on the road.

"Our one damn chance to hit him and you bugger it up. Our one damn chance," he yelled across the countryside.

The Nightrider's taunting voice stopped his tirade.

"Whooeee. Mad, bad and rancid. Can you see me me now, Toecutter? Did you see it, Toecutter? You would have loved it, man. Tell me you saw it in your dreams, Toecutter. Tell me you saw the Nightrider, the heavy cruiser, the true hallucinator, duck and weave and feint and swerve. And leave the Bronze in the dust."

Roop let out an anguished yell before the Nightrider started up again. "Well, we've got one cripple on our tail and one dead in the dust. Is that the best you can do, Bronze? Very dull. We're in danger of dying from boredom out here, Bronze. What must Mad Max be thinking, fellas?"

Sixty miles away — in the direction the Nightrider was hurtling — Mad Max was thinking that most cops on the road deserved to die. He'd heard what had happened during Roop and Charlie's bold but foolhardy attempt at a smash-and-grab capture of the Nightrider. Another couple of hoon cops, he thought, with as much lead in their heads as they have in their feet.

Although he hadn't witnessed what had happened, he had enough experience on Transcon One to picture it with absolute clarity in his mind's eye. And he'd known, as soon as he'd heard the chatter about the rendezvous at the intersection of Anarchie Road, that their primitive plan was doomed. The trouble was, he'd decided a long time ago, that most of the young lairs behind the wheels of police cars thought in terms of crash, bang, wallop instead of trying to outwit their prey.

And now, while the Nightrider and his girl sped to meet him, Max began to add the bits and pieces

to the police uniform which he'd casually been pulling on during Charlie and Roop's little piece of excitement. All the time he'd been planning how he'd go about nailing the guy.

While Max's brain was ticking over, carefully slotting together all the intricate pieces of information, knowledge and experience he'd need to make sure that he forced the Nightrider into the first mistake, Charlie had succeeded in re-starting the motor of the cop car.

"I think we're still mobile, Roop."

"For Chrissakes, look at it, will ya — and ya think we're still mobile," he said with the hint of mimicry creeping back into his voice.

Roop walked up to the driver's door. "Go on, shove over, for God's sake."

"You're blaspheming again. I don't have to work with a blasphemer," Charlie whined as he lifted himself across the console between the two seats.

Roop turned to Charlie, with bottled-up fury written clearly across his face, and grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "Shut up, Charlie. Shut up or I'll just damned well waste you before we go another yard."

Charlie realised that Roop was almost beside himself and that another careless word could well tip him over the edge. He looked straight at Roop and with all the self-possession he could muster, and with a surprisingly calm note in his voice, said: "OK partner. OK. Let's go get him and we'll talk about it later."

Roop let go of Charlie's shirt and almost simultaneously tramped his foot on the accelerator,



fishtailing the car over the dirt and rubble, barely harnessing the wild horses he'd unleashed in time to do a u-turn and blast off in pursuit of the Nightrider. They were scarcely on the highway before Roop, his face grim and hands clenched white on the wheel, turned to Charlie and told him to reload the shot-gun. While Charlie was leaning over the back seat to recover the weapon and ammunition, Roop pulled the mike off its stand and called in to March Hare.

"We're still in the game, March Hare. We're gonna pass go and we're gonna collect our trophies. Understand this: that crazy and his slut are gonna die."

Roop had barely replaced the mike before the manic voice of their quarry was cackling across the airwaves. "Oh Bronze, I am ready. I am ready for you and all your kind. I just gotta say how mighty pleased I am that at last you're treating me with the respect which is my due. I am the Nightrider and I'm on the biggest of the Big Runs."

Roop threatened to force the accelerator panel through the floorboards as he tried to extract every last ounce of power out of their battered machine. But the Nightrider hadn't finished.

"I'm a fuel-injected suicide machine," he sang to the cops. "I'm a rocker. I'm a roller. I'm an outa controller. I ain't never comin' back."

There was no word from March Hare. His silence suddenly became oppressive. Roop was only just this side of being demented with hate and humiliation. Finally Charlie tried to ease the atmosphere in the car. "Wonder what he'll be like when he

reaches puberty?"

Roop didn't take his eyes off the road. "Believe me, that ain't gonna be a problem for him," he said in a hard, flat voice.

Encouraged by the response, Charlie decided to raise a point which had only just occurred to him: "Where the hell's Jim Goose and that scooter of his?"

"Call him, then. Don't ask me – I'm not psychic," Roop snapped.

"Big Boppa to Gosling One," Charlie called into the microphone. After a few seconds he repeated the message.

Although Charlie didn't know it, the exercise was pretty pointless. Twenty miles down the road, in a dusty hamlet straggling along the edge of the Transcon, Jim Goose was hoeing into a breakfast of candy bars and thick-shakes at one of his favorite haunts – Fat Nancy's Roadside Diner. His superbike was parked out the front, gleaming in the early morning sun, its quadruple exhausts taking on the glint of gun-metal, its high-powered radio playing out the drama to itself.

"Where the hell is he?" Charlie asked, barely expecting to get an answer as he called again.

"Well, you got one of four choices. Belly, bladder, bowels or balls," Roop said. "Whichever one, I don't think Jim the Goose is gonna help us now."

"That's great – another fifty miles and he's home with a perfect score and we'll all end up wielding night-sticks in some damn ghetto."

"Now, now, Charlie. No blaspheming. We'll waste this turkey by ourselves if we have to."



At that moment, Roop caught sight, several miles ahead, of the two police cars pounding along one of the many straights on the Transcon One. The Nightrider was about half a mile ahead but he wasn't gaining on March Hare. Immediately, even Roop's uneducated brain managed to assess that the Nightrider's machine was damaged. If they could see him now, it meant that they had to be gaining on him, and that meant that if there were enough distance between their position and the border they'd have to be able to overhaul him. "Oh God," he thought, "if only I could drive *and* handle the artillery."

The Nightrider, glancing in his rear vision mirror to check on March Hare, caught sight of his new pursuer. His girl waited until he fixed his eyes on the road again, then dropped a couple of small blue tablets into a lemonade bottle and handed it to him. The Nightrider took a long swig out of the bottle, letting the liquid cool his mouth and the drugs fire his brain. As they entered the bloodstream and then his head, he snapped the microphone off the hook and renewed his taunting.

"We got company again. Glad to see you could make it, Bronze. Thought your bad driving might have wasted you. I always like another chance. The whole damn force is no match for the Nightrider. The heavy player."

Roop began to 'ride' the car, and, though his urging had nothing to do with the performance of the monstrous engine out front of him, he could tell now that he was overhauling both March Hare and the Nightrider.

Charlie too could see that in another ten minutes or so they would have replaced March Hare in the slot behind the Nightrider and, without realising it, he began to weigh the pump action shot-gun in his hands. He knew that he'd have to hit the bulls eye this time.

As bopped up as he was, the Nightrider also knew that Roop was doing better than anyone could have imagined, when less than fifteen minutes before it looked like his car had been written off. And, although the cops didn't know it, the Nightrider was having real problems. The collision had caused some minor, but in these circumstances critical, damage to his vehicle. He could no longer get the blast of power which so far had allowed him to elude capture. Like Roop, he was urging the car forward, gently straining against the racing harness binding his chest, and pressing his thumbs hard into the rim of the steering wheel.

The extra effort achieved nothing. Steadily Roop was eating up the distance which lay between them and, with a whoop of excitement from Charlie, Roop eased their unit out in the next lane. Air horns and siren blaring, he overtook March Hare and began to chip away at the last half mile which separated them from the Nightrider.

"Thumpin' Jesus, I think I can take him," Roop chuckled. Charlie was so caught up with the chase that he didn't even notice that his partner was blaspheming again. "He's got a lot of cubes in that thing, Roop."

"I'll take him . . . I'll take him and melt him," Roop yelled.



The Nightrider was now dividing his attention between the road thundering beneath his tyres and his rear vision mirror. A slow grin began to break across his face as he saw the expressions of the two cops through their windshield.

"Oh, honey, the Bronze are trying. They're trying with all their might. Only the Toecutter and the Nightrider could deal with this."

Behind him, the two cops were trying to stay calm enough to make sure that they didn't squander the opportunity.

"Now let's do this right, Charlie. Wait till I get alongside."

Charlie lifted the shot-gun and wound down his window. "I'll go for the girl."

"Forget the damned girl -- and forget about going for rubber. Go for the man. Just keep your head and wait till you see his neck in your sights and let him have it. With that amount of lead spraying around, you're sure to take him out."

"OK, OK. Just get us there," Charlie said, laying the gun three-quarters out of the window.

The Nightrighter was barely taking his eyes off the cop car behind. If he were going to have a chance, his timing would have to be perfect. He knew that this time round they'd try and guarantee themselves success. They'd almost certainly use their superior power to get alongside before letting fly with the shrapnel. His mind was working at fever pitch. Watching. Calculating.

The cop car was breathing down his exhaust. He saw its wheels begin to swing out. For a second he urged whatever reserve power there was out of

his straining engine, immediately eased his foot off the accelerator and got his other foot poised above the brake pedal.

Roop and Charlie were so intent on bringing their vehicle alongside that they didn't realise what their quarry had done. Suddenly they were much farther alongside the Nightrider than they'd anticipated and when, picking his moment with all the cunning and experience he could muster, he jammed his foot on the brake, they were past his window before they had time to think about it. That in itself would not have been enough to throw Charlie off his mark, but as the Nightrider hit the brakes he combined the momentum of the thrashing, protesting car with a violent jerk of the wheel towards the cop car.

It went like clockwork. The fraction of a second which Charlie lost due to the changed comparative speeds, the violence of the braking and the shock of the collision conspired to deprive him of his chance. His first blast peppered the bonnet of the Nightrider's car and several pellets lodged in the curved, laminated windshield, but the damage to the occupants wasn't fatal; tiny pieces of glass lodged in the girl's face. There wasn't even time to let go a second shell because Roop and Charlie had already straddled the median strip, veered across six lanes and hit the scrub at close to one hundred miles an hour.

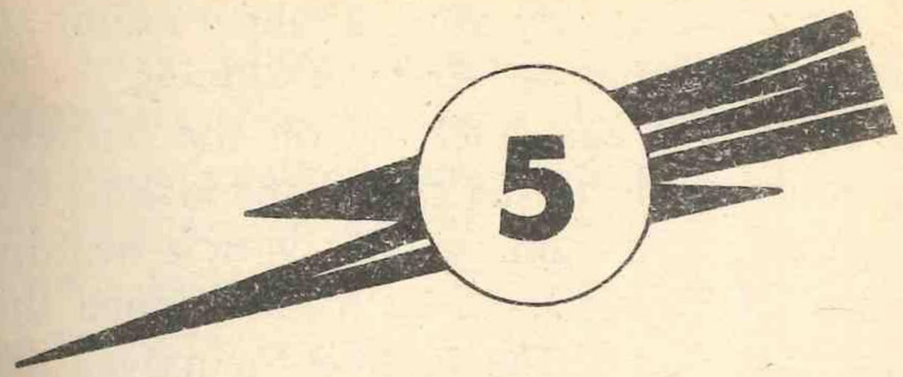
By a superhuman effort, using all his talent as a driver, he kept control of the car as it flattened the small bushes and kicked up a whirlwind of dust. He controlled his impulse to hit the brakes with every



pound of his strength and, slowing down, concentrated his efforts on steering a sweeping curve through the rubble and getting back on the asphalt. He hit the highway again at more than sixty miles an hour, on the wrong side of the road, with black smoke belching out of his engine.

As he slowed to re-negotiate the median strip, the Nightrider let them know his opinion: "Go with the craziness of it, Bronze. It's the only fun you'll get."

Not a word passed between Charlie and Roop. Both knew they'd been outwitted, that they'd both been at fault. The Nightrider was more than a match for them. Silently, they fell in behind March Hare and, though their quarry was less than a mile in front of them, the four cops knew that their only hope of overhauling him was if his vehicle blew up. Or Mad Max stopped him.




Max, still up at the river, learnt from the next bracket of radio messages that he was the only one left. Roop had finally swallowed his pride, and, as the Nightrider continued to pull further and further ahead, he radioed to base.

"Big Boppa here. We're outa the game. Vehicle badly damaged. March Hare in similar condition."

Seconds later, March Hare confirmed Roop's message. "The hoon's injured — but we're almost crippled. As far as we're concerned there's no chance of wasting him — unless he does it himself."

Before the reply could be broadcast Roop was back on the radio. Can you read me Max?" A crisp 'yes' crackled out of their speaker.

"He's all yours, Max. He's a real horror show."

Max didn't say a word.

It was the Nightrider who picked up and used the frequency. "You should see the damage to 'em, Bronze," he said with a laugh. "Metal damage. Brain damage. And damaged pride. The Toecutter

knows who I am, Max. He'll tell you I'm the Nightrider. I'm hotter than rollin' dice, man. Just step up and watch the kid lay down a rubber ribbon to freedom. Just you and me. And I'm winning."

Max was in his car, buckling on the harness, pulling on his lightly tinted glasses and kicking the motor over until it came to life with a healthy growl. One of his black-gloved hands slipped the gear-stick into first. The Interceptor moved off easily towards the highway, where Max guided it carefully to the side of the asphalt, the big motor idling and his fingers drumming on the steering wheel.

He wouldn't have long to wait. The Nightrider was approaching him with all the speed at his disposal, engine straining, mind racing.

"You want to get into some real sport, Bronze? You wanna know what it's like on the edge? You ready to go over it, Bronze?"

Max didn't move — only his fingers kept up the drum-beat, rapping out a tattoo. Small beads of perspiration dotted his upper lip and he glanced up toward the sun as it climbed higher into the sky. Ripples of heat washed across the road.

"You listening, Bronze? You know who I am, don't ya?"

Max's voice came soft across the couple of miles which separated them: "I know who you are, boy."

Maybe it was the shock of hearing Max speak, or maybe it was the calmness in the tone, but for the first time during the run the Nightrider felt a tremor in the pit of his stomach. This was no hys-



terical hoon cop. This was a pro. The best there was, they said.

Max didn't take his eyes off the curve, a mile or so away, where he would first catch sight of his adversary. No expression played across his face as he waited, calmly counting out the seconds leading up to their rendezvous. Even when he saw the battered, pirated cop car hurtle round the bend he didn't show any sign of emotion.

Quickly he engaged the engine, stamping on the accelerator, squealing the tyres and throwing up a shower of gravel. With the tyres biting on the tar, he swung down the highway; head-on towards the Nightrider, who picked him up immediately. Though he managed a grin, Max knew it was more for the girl than as any expression of confidence.

The two cars were approaching each other with a collision speed in excess of two hundred miles an hour, and at that speed there's no room for either timidity or miscalculation. Max was guilty of neither. When the two cars were less than a heartbeat away, Max threw his wheel to the left, corrected slightly and let his roo bar clip the door handles off the side of the Nightrider's vehicle. He had barely overtaken when he expertly threw his car into a 180-degree slide and, with rubber sizzling, swung round, less than forty yards behind the crazy.

The Nightrider was tired — and rattled — now. This cop was good. Mighty good.

The two cars thundered down the highway, sliding round a long sweeping curve, but it was obvious that Max had the superior hunk of machinery

around him. He crowded up, slipping in so close that his bumper and grille were lost to the Nightrider's rear view mirror.

The high was gone. The cop was too close. Too alert for every minute change in speed and position. Duck and weave, brake and accelerate, but it was as if the two cars were being controlled by the same driver. The Nightrider knew he was losing it. He could feel his mouth and throat become parched. The panic begin to rise and the bowels loosen. Frantically, he tried to shake Max, and as the realisation came to him that Max was the best he'd ever known he could feel tears start to sting the corners of his eyes. His teeth were grinding, his knuckles bloodless. A low sob escaped his lips.

The girl looked at him with panic written across every furrow in her brow, "What's wrong, man? What is it?"

"Babe, I've seen his face. It's not foolin' no more. It's going . . . it's going."

More by instinct than anything else, he kept the car thundering down the road eating up a slight dip, then approaching a steep hill. Max made no attempt to overtake him. The Nightrider knew he could just sit there forever.

Locked together they roared up the hill, pistons overworking and every nut and bolt being tested to the limit of endurance — and beyond.

The Nightrider barely noticed the man standing just below the crest of the hill. If he had, he would have seen that he was waving his hands in a desperate attempt to get the two cars to slow down.

The Nightrider wouldn't have cared, even if he



had heard the man's screams.

Max saw him and, relying on nothing more than the instinct of the road, he braked with all his might, his tyres searing into the tar and his car coming to a screeching, screaming halt past the top of the rise.

Max was just in time to see the Nightrider sheer the whole top of his car off as he hit the tray of a semi-trailer jack-knifed at an angle across the road. The battered police car was opened up, like one of those old-fashioned sardine cans, as it plunged beneath the metal beams of the road-train. As what was left of it smashed into a set of multiple wheels on the far side of the tray, it simply disintegrated.

Max sat slumped over his wheel, barely twenty yards from the rig which had been the Nightrider's executioner. His heart was pounding, the blood racing through his veins and popping them out on his forehead like a stylised road map. He heard, rather than saw, the driver of the rig running up the road calling and cursing himself into hysterics.

Seconds passed. Slowly Max pulled himself back in his seat and unbuckled the harness. His breathing was laboured and his movements heavy. He reached for the microphone.

"The Nightrider and his girl . . ." he cleared his throat. "They're wasted. Well and truly wasted."

The image flickered across the television screen as a camera panned the roadway, over scattered pieces of what had once been a car, to a shot of twisted junk wedged beneath a semi-trailer.

A disembodied voice gave the commentary

". . . the driver, who identified himself as the Nightrider, was wanted on a number of charges, including the murder of a police officer. He and his fifteen-year-old companion, a runaway from the Centre for Juvenile Readjustment, were killed instantly. A police spokesman said earlier today that it was the eighteenth time this year offenders had died while attempting a Big Run up the Big Street.

"We now cross to Richard Jamison for a look at tomorrow's weather . . ."

Jessie uncurled herself from the floor, disentangled her arms from Max's and clicked off the set. It was already night, but through the windows of the rambling weatherboard house she could pick out the white froth of surf as wave after wave dashed itself against the rocks at the bottom of the cliff.

The surrounding countryside was locked in darkness; the only lights were those gleaming from the house, and a small spotlight casting a pool of light across the front drive. The spot illuminated the squat shape of Max's Interceptor, and behind it, Jessie's car — a low metallic-finish street van, complete with wide wheels, chromed exhausts and a spoiler.

Jessie knelt beside Max again, and as she took up a towel to rub his hair dry, asked the question that had been on her mind most of the evening. "That was pretty rough out there today — that Nightrider business?"

Max nuzzled the top of his head against the towel. "Oh, no worse than any Big Run — easier



maybe. I didn't have to do anything — just sit back and let him blow himself to pieces."

"What's the trouble then? Why the frown all through dinner?"

"Just tired I guess, honey. No other reason. I've got you and Sprog; why should I worry?"

"Max, that's crap. There's talk on the road . . ."

"What sort of talk?"

"About your life expectancy — they're makin' book on it. It's odds on that you won't see a week. What happened out there today, Max?"

Max pulled his head out from the towel and turned to face her, squaring his shoulders and fixing her with his eyes. "Who told you there was a book being run?"

"Carol, Jim Goose's girl. She rang just before you got home to tell me that the Goose had told her."

"Don't you listen to Carol or anyone else. It's just street jive. Nothing more than a lot of people putting things together and coming up with the wrong answer. The hoon that bought it tonight had a tiny tattoo on his cheek. Some smart pen-pusher at HQ suggested that it might be the sign of membership of a gang. That's all. Nothing more than a guess; and then some other smart-arse cop hears that while the crazy's going for the Big Run he's talking all the time about somebody called the Toecutter. Before you know it, we've got this huge gang, headed by someone called the Toecutter that no one's ever heard of, and that he's getting the troops together to make a big play for revenge."

"Revenge," Jessie said softly, "against you.

Right?"

"Don't start, Jess. The guy was babbling – he was loaded on pills – talking crap. There's no gang, no Toecutter and there won't be any revenge. Now let's drop it."

"But Max . . ."

"I said drop it, Jess."

Jessie put her arms round his neck and began to kiss him just below the ear, rubbing his cheek with her nose and darting her tongue in and out. Slowly he turned towards her, slipping his hands beneath the hem of her dress and letting them wander – up along her slim legs to the bottom of her pants. Jessie leaned to one side, pulled him down on the rug with her, then slipped her arms through the shoulder ties of her frock. The top fell down, exposing her firm, brown breasts and a pair of upright pink nipples.

Max gave a low, playful growl and let the towel he was wearing drop from his waist.

They woke together, long past midnight, still curled up on the rug, the night-time chill making their flesh crawl with goose-bumps. Max stretched and tried to get the crick out of his neck by twisting it from side to side. Jessie began to laugh at his antics till Max cut her short by leaping to his feet: "Holy hell, what's the time? I'm supposed to be on three am patrol."

He stumbled across the room to the coffee table, switching on the light and grabbing his watch. "An hour late already. Get my stuff will you honey while I call into base."

Jessie, still drugged by sleep, dragged herself



upright. She began to lay Max's uniform out in the lounge-room while her husband, still naked, unlocked the front door and headed for the car.

"Mad Max to base. I've been delayed at home – anything doing?"

"You there Max, we've been trying to contact you. There's been an eight vehicle pile-up on the Transcon, Section twenty-three. Triple fatality already. Please proceed there immediately and assist. Oh, and Max, the Chief's there."

"Copied you, base. On my way."

Max arrived at the scene as the tow truck drivers were carting away the last of the wreckage. Roop had the situation well in hand. Already traffic was starting to flow freely again along the superhighway. Max pulled up his car alongside an almost identical interceptor, killed the engine and walked around to the driver's side window of the other vehicle. A cop, a good ten years older than Max, was sitting behind the wheel watching his men operate. He was a big man with a thick neck, broad shoulders and powerful forearms. He was also, Max never failed to note, very ugly. His nose had been battered and bashed so many times that it now sat squat and shapeless across his broad face, making the eyes appear far too close together and the mouth too small to balance it. The ears protruded, given far more prominence than they deserved by the fact that his head was completely bald.

As the name painted along the bottom edge of one door testified, this was Macaffee. The Chief.

"I didn't expect to find you here, Chief," Max said as he leaned against the window.

Without taking his eyes off the operation in

front of him Macaffee replied: "Don't expect you did, Max, otherwise you might have got your arse here a damn sight quicker."

Max wasn't perturbed by the reproach. He knew that the Chief wouldn't risk offending his top pursuit cop over a routine pile-up. "I got tied up at home."

The Chief grunted and then, after a moment's silence, said: "I came up to see you, Max. There's something I want to talk to you about. Let's take a walk."

Macaffee swung his large, overweight body through the door of the Interceptor, forcing Max to back off a pace or two, and began to walk towards the darkness on the edge of the highway. Max swung round to fall into step beside him.

"I don't know whether this is important or not, Max, but it's my job to keep you informed, I guess," the Chief said; and without giving his patrolman a chance to reply, went on. "You know that guy and his girl you rode down the other morning? That Nightrider on the Big Run? Well, we got a problem."

"What problem?"

"It seems that his friends wanna get even. The word's out that they're looking for whoever nailed him."

"Do you know that for sure," Max said, without any hint of emotion in his voice.

"Yeah. It seems pretty definite. A group of motorbike-nomad trash. We haven't got any form on them except that there's a lot of talk on the streets and in the pits about it."



"You heard of some guy called the Toecutter?"

"I suppose I should have guessed," the Chief said with a smile, "you've heard already."

"Just a whisper that's all."

"Well, I can't tell you very much. The Toecutter's supposed to be the leader and he's making a lot of noise about wasting you."

"Thanks Chief," Max said as they turned back to their cars. "I'll add it to my death threat collection."

The Chief let out a loud belly laugh and clapped Max on the back. "You're a good kid, Max. One day you'll make a good cop."

"Thanks again, Chief. I'm just not sure I'll get to live that long if you keep coming up and trying to scare the daylights out of me."

"Have you got anything on now?" the Chief asked, and then answered his own question. "How the hell would you know? You've been balling on department time. Follow me down to HQ and I'll show you something that should interest you. Sort of a surprise, you could call it."

"Not a medal, I hope, boss."

The Chief's laugh thundered out again providing an eerie contrast to the scene of destruction barely fifty yards away. "No chance of that, Max. Salary's the only recognition you'll ever get on the Transcon."

The two men climbed into their cars. Almost in unison the engines thundered to life, drawing the attention of the knot of spectators away from the accident, as they roared into the quickly fading night.

# 6

With barely five minutes between them, Max and the Chief drew up nose to bonnet in the courtyard of the huge multi-storey building officially known as Main Force Headquarters, but more popularly referred to as Colditz after a legendary castle. Layer upon layer of windows stared out of blank walls onto the courtyard — turned into a shaft of light by the electricity burning over desks of hundreds of police officers toiling away in a futile attempt to handle the reams of paperwork which had by now become the primary function of the cops.

A few of them glanced out idly to see the hulking figure of the Chief walking towards the Main Force workshop. A couple even recognised the cop at his side as the patrolman with the heavyweight reputation.

Together they walked through a roll-up metal door and were greeted by a small man wearing greasy overalls and a ready smile.

"Hello, Chief. Hi Max."

The Chief nodded a greeting while Max playfully punched the grease monkey in the chest. "Morning, Carbie."

"Are you fellas here to inspect it then?"

"How do I know," Max replied, "all the Chief would say is that he's got a surprise for me."

"Well, it's quite a surprise," Carbie said. He led them further into the bowels of the huge workshop, walking strangely, favouring one leg and rolling his body – the legacy of an accident a long time ago which had cost him his right forearm, and left one leg slightly shorter than the other. They walked past row after row of police cars in various states of disrepair; through the equipment section where shelves stretched to the ceiling, overburdened with the mechanical paraphernalia necessary to dress wounds inflicted by over-zealous cops; into the panel beating section, which was already aflame with the glow and smell of high-powered oxy-acetylene equipment, and out to a room which Max had never even realised existed.

Carbie left them a second and flicked a switch to operate arc lights suspended from the ceiling. As Max's eyes adjusted to the harsh glare he saw a lone car on chocks in the middle of the room. It was a police car. But only just.

It was a pursuit special. Black on black. The bonnet was off, revealing the chromed V-8 motor reflecting the light in blazing pinpoints. Highly chromed exhausts swept along its sides, flaring up



at the back where a complicated system of spoilers guaranteed that its rear-end would stay road-bound at almost any speed. Before Max had the chance to notice any more details he saw Carbie climb up behind the wheel and hit the ignition. With a thundering, rolling explosion, the engine roared to life.

The noise was awesome in the cavern of the workshop and, as it built towards a crescendo of naked power, all Max could do was mouth an obscenity. Behind the wheel, Carbie was grinning like a child.

Finally he climbed down and walked back to join the Chief and Max. "She's the last of the V-8's, Max. Probably the fastest car to ever come out of this workshop. It's turbo-charged with desmo valves, a four-phase head, flow exhausts and twin overhead cams. It'll deliver 400 true horses at the wheels and sucks more methane than the department can probably afford."

Nothing could stop Carbie now. "The bitch is born to run. I've had her out once and I've never driven any road car like it. She handles like a child and accelerates like a monster."

"OK, Carbie," Max interrupted, "how the hell did you get all this together?"

"It just sort of fell into place. A piece from here . . . a piece from there. A refinement now and again, some modifications along the way."

"Gonna take me for a ride, Carbie?"

"Sure, Max, just let me get some wheels on it."

As Carbie limped off to find an assistant, the Chief turned to face Max. "It's yours, copper. Just look after it, will ya?"

Before Max could answer, the Chief was making his way across the room, calling over his shoulder, "I'll be in my office when you get back. Come and see me, OK?"

As the Pursuit Special rolled out of the workshop, its engine burbling happily, Macaffee was standing high up at his office window looking down into the courtyard. Standing next to him was a middle-aged man dressed in an ill-fitting grey suit, an old-fashioned narrow tie and a white shirt which had obviously seen better days.

"I think," Macaffee said, "we've got him, Mr Commissioner."

"I hope so, Macaffee. It's certainly an expensive exercise."

"I'm sure we have, sir. He was like a kid on Christmas morning when I told him it was his. He's already in love with it – nothing will separate him from it."

"That's your belief, Macaffee. It's not necessarily mine. Nevertheless, I'm willing to follow your advice in this matter. However, I'd be less than honest if I didn't say that it goes against my principles to – what shall I say – buy off an officer who you think may leave the force. It seems to me that it's hardly necessary to try and seduce your top pursuit man with candy. Frankly, I think you may have over-estimated this threat against him."

Anybody who knew the Chief well would have realised that he was furious, but he controlled his rage and answered in a tone which was nothing but respectful.



"I have no doubt, Mr Commissioner, that the threat against Max's life is no joke. I've dealt with too many death threats in the past not to realise the genuine article when I meet it. All of the information we've received in the last 24 hours confirms that the Toecutter and his cycle crazies are absolutely determined on revenge, either against Max or his family."

"What does Max think of the threat?"

"I've told him the short facts, Mr Commissioner, but I've attempted to play down the whole matter. He's under the impression that it's just idle street gossip. However, I do know that there has been some pressure on him at home to leave the force. Combined with a feeling of disillusionment, it's my opinion that when he realises just how serious the threat is, not only to himself, but especially to his family, he will probably resign immediately and hightail it out of the area."

"And you think that some pretty little car – some vehicle all dressed up like a Barbie doll – will make him change his mind?"

"I think I understand my men, Mr Commissioner. I think that the car will be just enough to tip the scales in our favour."

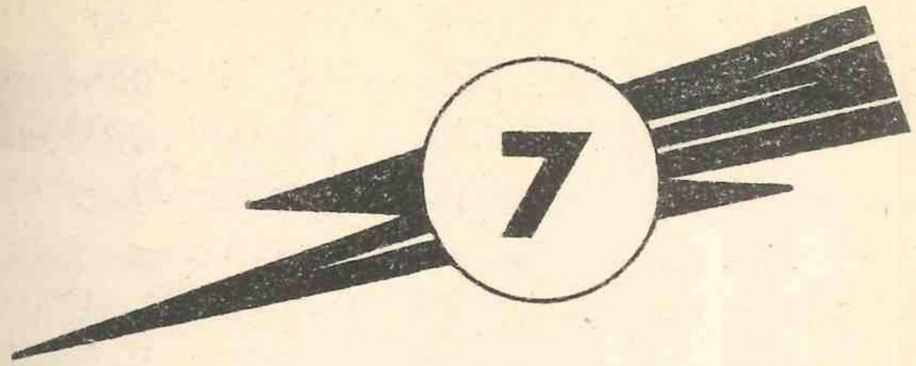
"Well, I've said it before Macaffee, and I'll say it again: I don't enjoy wasting money. And I certainly don't enjoy equipping your men with fabulously expensive machinery just so they can go round the country acting like lairs."

"I appreciate that, Mr Commissioner, but the fact is that Max is the only man I have capable of effectively patrolling the final section of the Trans-

con. I think we're both aware of the consequences if the rate of apprehension before the State Line declines any further."

The Commissioner stared out of the window, watching the thundering machine disappear through the courtyard gates and out into the street. "That, Chief, is the only reason I've agreed to this plan. Goodbye and good luck."






Jerusalem was a town which never made a map. Its only importance was that a secondary freeway — Highway 69 — and a rarely used railway happened to coincide there. In better times the cross-country road rigs had stopped at Jerusalem to transfer their cargo onto freight trains; but that had long since stopped, and its only function now was to service trucks and travellers who used the highway. The railway still ran — more or less — once a week, but that was more through some bureaucratic oversight than through any commercial necessity. The dying town consisted of a gas station, a pub, a diner and the train station. Few people ever went there, fewer ever remembered it.

Like countless days in the past, and undoubtedly like countless days in the future, the only sign of life in the town was a dog flopped on the gravel shoulder of the road.

It could have been dead, except for one ear pricked up and honing in on some noise as yet

inaudible to human hearing. Gradually the dog raised its head. With both ears alert now, it looked through the heat haze down the highway. It stayed in that position for several seconds and then rose to its feet, standing in the dust, looking in the direction of a low rumble, like far away thunder.

Wide-eyed, lips curled back to bare its teeth, the dog tensed every muscle as the roar of massed, high-powered machines rolled along the highway towards it.

Out of the shimmering heat, the first riders appeared. They were arranged across three lines in a wedge-shaped formation which seemed, at first sight, to stretch forever. The man at the head of the phalanx wore the same uniform as the sixty or seventy outlaws who followed him. He sat astride his super-bike, 1000 cc of black power, in racing leathers, complete with clip-on knee, elbow pads and full-face helmet — all covered in dust and splattered insects. His bike boasted full racing faring and it had obviously been built for speed over long, long distances. The only thing distinguishing him from his comrades was a feather arm-band which he wore around his right bicep. He had a small tattoo on his cheek.

The noise was overwhelming as the black-leathered, high-powered horde roared into Jerusalem. The dog wrapped its tail between its legs and loped off to hide behind a shed attached to the crumbling railway station.

The owner of the gas station ran onto the wooden verandah surrounding his office to gaze in



awe at what he believed could only be the devil's henchmen. He was joined, on the other side of the road, by the driver of a beaten-up interstate freight rig and two young girls, fifteen going on thirty, dressed in tight jeans, halter tops and inviting smiles.

The sound of massed exhausts built to a booming crescendo as the bikies thundered through the town — seemingly performing some primitive drive-past — then died as the leader reached the other end of the main street and turned back. He passed his troops still going in the opposite direction. A stage manager couldn't have done a better job. As he rode by the other bikies, they peeled off to the left to angle-park their magnificent, evil machines in the dust on the shoulder of the road. By the time he reached the end of the column, all of the bikes were in position. He pulled his off the road, leaving it at the head of the row of throbbing metal. In unison, the riders switched off their engines and waited for the leader to dismount. The silence was more threatening than thunder.

Slowly the leader lifted off his helmet, deliberately swung one leg across the fuel tank and stood next to his bike. There was not a sound in the street. His hair, flattened by the long ride, was blond; the eyes blue. His face had the unmistakable twist of cruelty. He was big. The shoulders beneath the leather were broad, and his thighs swelled against his leggings. Curling his lip, he looked down his troops, then threw his helmet to the man on the next bike.

It was obviously a time-honoured signal, for,

without a word being spoken, the others dismounted. They pulled off their helmets and began yelling abuse at one another.

As they mingled in twos and threes in the middle of the street, the leader walked across the dustbowl which served as the driveway to the filling station and stood facing the owner.

"Afternoon, mister," the owner said.

The leader looked him up and down. Raising his eyes back to the man's face, he said: "I'm known as the Toecutter. And I'm here to meet a friend who came in on this morning's train."

"Sorry, mister. Nobody came in on this morning's train. No one's come in on the train in years to my recollection."

"I said, in case you didn't hear, that I'm to meet a friend who came in on this morning's train."

"I'm real sorry, mister, but I think he musta missed it. The only things that came in this morning were a few crates and a coffin . . ."

His conversation trailed off as he realised his mistake.

"That's my friend, mister."

"Yeah, well, sorry about that. I didn't understand. It's a matter of seein' the agent and signin' the papers."

"And where's this agent?"

"Right here, that's me."

"Now why don't you be real helpful and just . . ."

Quickly the man moved back into his office. "Sure . . . wait here . . . I'll be right back."

As the frightened owner disappeared, seven of



the Toecutter's trusted lieutenants drifted to his side. Only one of them, Johnny the Boy, didn't sport the same tattoo on his right cheek. Together, Johnny, Bubba Zanetti, Mudguts, Cundalini, Clunk, Diabando and Starbuck flanked their leader.

Quickly the owner returned.

"Well, we've got ourselves organised here," he said, as he came through the door wearing his railway agent's peaked hat and carrying a clipboard supporting some dog-eared papers.

"If you'd just like to sign here, we can move over to the station and you can collect the . . . I mean, you can get your friend." He handed the clipboard and a pen to the Toecutter and pointed to the spot for his signature. The Toecutter didn't appear to take his eyes off the man. Then, grabbing the pen, he scratched a large 'X' across the bottom of the page. His stare didn't flicker.

The man looked down at the mark, felt the Toecutter's eyes on him, and cleared his throat. "Uh, fine. I don't guess no one looks at them anyhow."

"Don't guess they do," said the Toecutter.

"Well, let's go then," he said, moving off across the road, the gang falling in behind him. The Nightrider was waiting for them.

Together, the large delegation walked onto the platform, kicking up the dust of years, passing the long-shattered windows of the waiting room and the knee-deep litter piled in the station-master's office.

"I reckon that's what you're looking for over there," the agent said, indicating a surprisingly small coffin sitting on a trolley at the far end of the platform.

"Don't look like there was too much of him left," he remarked, and then, as he felt the eyes of Bubba and Mudguts turn on him, added quickly: "the poor bastard."

The Toecutter turned on his heel, grabbed the man's face between his hands, pinching his cheeks between thumb and forefinger. He looked straight into his eyes.

"The Nightrider," he hissed. "His name's the Nightrider."

The agent realised from the eyes in front of him that the Toecutter was capable of anything; like a child who could tear the wings off flies, the Toecutter would get a thrill of excitement out of hurting him, seeing him slowly twist in pain.

"The . . . Nightrider," he managed to enunciate through twisted lips.

Deliberately the Toecutter increased the pressure between his fingers and simultaneously pulled the flesh away from the man's cheekbones until the agent realised that his mouth was about to rip at the corners. Tears were stinging his eyes. A flicker of pleasure crossed the Toecutter's face.

"Remember him when you look up at the night sky."

The agent could no longer speak. His face was a blanket of pain and his mind a bed of fear. Somehow he managed to nod his agreement.

"Good, I'm glad you understand the situation,"



the Toecutter whispered as he relaxed his hands.

"Now I want you to take that hat off."

"Sure, whatever you say." He swept the hat from his head and twiddled it between his fingers in front of his crutch.

"That's very, very good. Now get out of my sight, and tell the rest of the audience back there that if I so much as see them peep through a window, they'll be joining the Nightrider. Except for the two sluts. Tell them we'll be needing them later. Understand?"

"Yes. Yes, I do," he said as he backed off down the platform, bumping into Cundalini and being pushed roughly against Diabando. Recovering his balance, he turned around and scurried off, head and shoulders hunched, to hide in the depths of his office.

Alone, the Toecutter walked towards the coffin. He stood looking down on it in a silent reverie. Minutes passed while the rest of the horde shuffled their feet and licked their parched lips. Finally the Toecutter turned and moved towards them.

"We'll go back and wait for the pick-up to arrive. You can't have a funeral without a hearse." His voice was cold and cruel. Those that knew him well understood that he was seething with a quiet, deadly rage. Without another word, he led them back to their bikes and, leaning against the saddle of his machine, stared down the road in the direction from which he expected the highly chromed pick-up.

He was a man apart. While the others gathered in small knots along the road, talking and horsing

it with each other, pulling on beer cans and throwing off their leathers, he was in another world. A demented world where fear and cruelty ruled, where hate was the god and destruction his servant.

The Toecutter didn't even notice when Mudguts and Clunk walked into the garage office. Mudguts found the owner in darkness at the rear of the building.

"Where are the sluts, old man?"

Almost with relief, he replied: "In the diner, I told 'em to wait for you." Without another word, Mudguts turned on his heel and, grabbing Clunk by the arm, began to steer him out of the shop. The owner stifled an objection as Clunk grabbed a large, grey inflatable plastic elephant from behind the counter and carried it out into the street.

"What do ya want that for, ya crazy?"

"I never had an elephant before," Clunk replied with the wide grin and slow speech which marked him as a simpleton. Mudguts left him to it and walked towards the diner. Clunk, carrying the toy under its front legs, walked into the middle of the street, placed it carefully on the road and began to stroke its head.

Mudguts walked into the diner. The waitress, a full-blown woman in her late thirties with bleached hair and over-ripe breasts, stood behind the counter talking to a man of similar age. From his dress he was obviously the owner of the freight rig parked out the front. They looked at Mudguts, trying to keep all expression from their eyes. He scanned the booths and tables. At the back of the soiled, decaying room he saw the girls sitting and



talking to two youths of about seventeen or eighteen. Arranging a sneer on his face, he walked up to them.

"I'm glad you decided to wait," he said, addressing the girls. They giggled a reply.

"Why don't you come outside and meet a few of the fellas." It was more a command than a request, but they looked inquiringly at the youths.

The taller of the two, a kid called Tom, was caught between fear of Mudguts and a desire to continue chatting up the two girls whom he had already assessed as easy lays. Lust overcame his anxiety and, trying to look Mudguts in the eye, he said: "I think we're OK here thanks."

Tom didn't even see it coming. Mudguts' right hand, still encased in leather riding gloves, swept the level of the table top and backhanded him across the mouth, splitting his lip and rattling his teeth.

"Still OK, boy — or would you like a little more unhappiness?" Mudguts spat out the words and Tommy's friend, Bobby, didn't make a move.

The bikie was standing over them now, feeling the eyes of the waitress and the truckie on his back. Slowly he leaned forward to Judy, the girl sitting nearest him. When his face was above hers, quick as lightning, he grabbed the top of her skimpy halter-style t-shirt. He twisted it in his hand, tightening it across her shoulder blades and dragging it downwards over her swelling breasts until they popped out.

Mudguts gazed down at her nipples. The girl stared at him in fear.

"Now you'd like to come outside, wouldn't you?" he said with a chuckle that left the girl in no doubt about what he had in mind. "I'm sure that the guys would like to see more of you," he said with a leer.

Her throat was dry. She made no reply. Mudguts twisted the fabric of her top even tighter in his hand until it bit into the flesh just below her breasts. He jerked her to her feet, pulled her out from behind the table and, while the truckie and waitress tried not to watch, began to pull her towards the door. Mudguts stopped when he had her several steps away from the table; Tom, licking and patting at his split lip, and the other two, Bobby and Mary, sitting absolutely still. Turning half towards them, Mudguts put the fingertips of his left gauntlet to his lips and pulled it off with his teeth. Standing with it still in his mouth, a smile crinkling the corners of his eyes, he grabbed Judy's breast with his naked hand, kneading the flesh, feeling her nipples squashed against the palm of his hand. Slowly he increased the pressure of his hand until his finger nails were biting into her and he could feel her trying to squirm away with pain. The others watched with a mixture of fascination and fear. He let the glove drop from his teeth. "I think your friends would probably like to join us, wouldn't they?" Mary felt her heart skip a beat. The three of them knew that it was an order. Any attempt to refuse would only bring Mudguts – and possibly some of his cronies – down on them. They got to their feet.

Mudguts looked Mary up and down. "You,"



he said, indicating Mary, "you're not going to allow your friend to go out there all alone like this, are you?"

Mary shook her head.

"Good, that's what we need, more co-operation round here. After all, it's all good clean fun, isn't it?"

Whitefaced, she nodded her head.

"Isn't it, fellas – I mean you're not upset or anything, are you? You tell Mudguts if you're not having a good time."

"No, it's fine," said Bobby.

"Yeah, great," Tom said through his split and bleeding lip.

"Well, that's all straightened out then," he said with mock relief.

"What's your name," he said to Mary.

"Mary."

"Well, Mary, as you said, you can't let your little friend go out half undressed and all alone, can you?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on: "So why don't you join her?" An edge of command crept into his voice. "Take your jeans off."

Mary stared at him. "You heard me," he rasped.

His eyes bored into her. Hands shaking, she began, reluctantly, to undo them.

The waitress and the truckie didn't move.

She slowly pulled the jeans over her hips, exposing the tiny vee of the crutch of her pants to Mudguts' leering face and, one leg at a time, awkwardly pulled the denim over her shoes.

"Now give them to one of the fellas there; we'll

make him wardrobe mistress," he said.

Mary handed her jeans to Tom, who rolled them up to carry in his hand.

"That looks a lot better. Now turn around." To his satisfaction, Mudguts stared at thighs and the shape of her arse. "Well, I think we're ready now. There should be something here to please everyone, tits and bums. You two go first," he said to the two youths.

Side by side they walked out of the cafe and into the glare of the street. Their appearance was barely noticed but, seconds later when Mudguts appeared at the door, flanked by the semi-naked girls, a wild shout went up from a couple of the horde. Mudguts was smiling so much that his face was fit to crack.

Attracted by the first shout, the rest of the gang began to cheer and whoop their approval.

Mudguts' appearance had disturbed a strange performance by Clunk in the middle of the road. Although at first he had been content to just stroke the plastic elephant, he soon hit on the idea of using the plastic animal as a make-believe lover. Much to the amusement of the large group of his mates who gathered around, he began to kiss its ears and tell it a string of loving endearments. Gradually he became more passionate in his embraces. He began to writhe on the ground with it, while several of the onlookers gave a running commentary on Clunk's attempts at seduction. Advice flowed freely.

Clunk was having a great time and was disappointed when, just at the moment it was obvious



he was going to have his way with the elephant, by now on its back, Mudguts came out of the cafe and distracted the enthusiastic crowd. Nevertheless he persevered, despite the attraction which Mudguts and the two girls were offering to the beer-swilling bikies.

Acknowledging the cheers of the gang, Mudguts instructed the two youths to walk towards the spot where Clunk was locked in the throes of passion. The girls moved closer to Mudguts as the clamour rose. He slipped his right arm around Judy's shoulders and brought his hand to rest on her breast, cradling it in his hand and holding the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. At the same time he put his left arm around Judy's waist, pulling her close to him, and slipped his fingers down the waist-band of her pants until he could just touch her pubic hair.

By any account, Mudguts' ingenuity and imagination had proved a winner. He was not only the centre of attention, but it was obvious from their expressions that he had gained their admiration. Any of the others would have just dragged the two girls out of the cafe and thrown them into the street. Mudguts' decision to turn it into a titillating performance ensured that it would be a day to remember. For months, the horde would talk about the sight of Mudguts — led out by two frightened youths — appearing at the door of the cafe and walking across the main street of Jerusalem with a half-naked teenager on either side. The story would be embellished, exaggerated and improved upon until, for a while at least, Mudguts would be a

popular folk-hero among the trash who rode the super-highways.

Even Mudguts, who was not renowned for his sparkling intelligence, realised that he had brought off a major coup and he was enjoying it more and more by the minute. With the two girls locked firmly in position, he reached the outer edge of the crowd which had gathered to watch Clunk's primitive love-making. He noticed with immense satisfaction how his comrades parted to allow first the youths, and then him and the girls, through to the front of the circle.

As they walked through the bikies, Judy felt -- rather than saw — hands come out and grab at her breasts. Rough hands were pressing and pulling at her flesh and fingers were squeezing her nipples. On the other side, Mary was having a similar problem — no sooner would she walk past one of the bikies than a hand, generally accompanied by a raucous laugh, would dive between her thighs and make a grab at her crutch. Finally, they were at the front and Clunk, relieved to find that he had not been completely overshadowed, began to throw himself into the 'love-making' with renewed enthusiasm. The four teenagers stared in astonishment at the grown man writhing on the ground, clutching an inflatable toy to his groin and 'whispering' filthy encouragements in its ear.

Cundalini, standing next to them, turned to Judy. After an admiring glance at her breasts, he told her: "Poor old Clunk. He used to be an authentic genius until he went over the high side."

"He came through the other," Mudguts continued, "but when they put him back together they had to use a metal plate to replace most of his brain."



"He's definitely not like the rest of us," Cundalini said with a laugh. "I mean who'd worry about screwing a plastic elephant when there are girls like you around — and available."

Moving closer to Judy, so that she could feel his leathers rasping against the flesh of her arm and smell his breath, he looked down at her and asked, "You are available, aren't you?"

Mudguts was watching the performance, by now fast approaching a climax, as Clunk rutted around in the street with increasing frenzy. Judy knew that he hadn't heard Cundalini's veiled threat.

"Yeah, sure," she faltered and then, as an idea struck her simple mind, she continued with more confidence, "but I don't want all these guys. I'm not available to all of them, you know."

"Oh, I think you'd be surprised, little chicken. I think you'd be real surprised."

Cundalini turned to Mudguts and, in a soft, mock-solicitous voice, told him that Judy had made it clear that she was available. But not to everyone, mind. Mudguts roared with laughter and, before Judy knew what was happening, he had plunged his hand down her jeans and into her pants.

"You're right, Cundalini. I think you're right," he said.

Mary, standing on the other side of Mudguts, was trying her hardest to stop another of the gang stroking her between the legs from behind. She couldn't see who was doing it, but from the laugh-

ter in her ear it was obvious he was enjoying it.

Finally, in the middle of the circle in front of them, Clunk gave a long low moan, separated himself from the battered toy and struck the attitude of a man exhausted. This brought cheers — and a shower of beer cans — from the audience, which now turned its attention on Mudguts and his newfound young 'friends'.

"Shall we go back to the diner, kiddies?" Mudguts asked, making no attempt to remove his hand from Judy's crutch. "I think it's about time we tested the availability of the model, eh Cundalini?"

Cundalini gave a whoop and, turning to Mary — much to the delight of the onlookers — grabbed one of her breasts in his powerful hand and pulled her top partially down, exposing the other one to the hungry eyes of the gang.

"Cundalini, you'd better bring the two boyfriends along — we wouldn't want them to miss out, would we?"

Cundalini turned towards Tom and, with no warning, smacked him with an open palm across his mouth, opening up his lip again and causing a small trickle of blood to edge its way down the cleft of his chin. "C'mon you two," was all he said as he pushed Bobby and Tom in front of him. Mudguts and Judy were leading the procession across the street, Judy's breasts by now were sore and red from the constant mangling they'd been receiving and her jeans were unzipped to the crutch. The two youths followed, behind them Cundalini and the almost-naked Mary, and then a group of about thirty or forty of the gang. All of



them were prepared to make sure that they didn't miss out when Cundalini and Mudguts, two of the Toecutter's most trusted lieutenants, had finished with the girls.

At the door of the diner, Mudguts turned to the rest of them and said: "You guys wait here — and just be patient. Cundalini and I are going to go in and see if we can come to some sort of friendly arrangement with the two young ladies and their boyfriends."

His little address brought cheers, jeers and laughter from the crowd, but it was the storm of beer cans that followed which drove the six of them inside. The waitress and the truckie had disappeared and Mudguts decided to go and search the toilets for them. He didn't want some fool coming in and disturbing his fun.

As Mudguts disappeared through the door Bobby saw his chance. Cundalini was standing at the window, drawing a hail of abuse from the rest of the gang and returning it with obscene gestures. Bobby grabbed Mary by the hand and dragged her towards the back of the diner, past the rows of tables and out through the back door.

Judy, on the other side of Cundalini and Tom, standing several feet away and paying more attention to his lip than anything else, had been too slow to notice what had happened until they heard the back door slam and the bolt slide across from the outside.

Cundalini swivelled on his heel, smashed his fist into Tom's chest to knock him out of the way and ran for the door. It was too late. Bobby and Mary

were already out of the store-room on the other side of the door and running for their lives across twenty yards of open paddock to Bobby's hot rod, parked under cover of a small lean-to shed. Bobby threw himself into the driver's seat and desperately fired the engine while Mary clambered into the passenger's seat. With a squeal of rubber and a billowing cloud of dust, the lovingly customised hot-rod blasted out of the shed in reverse. As soon as he was clear, Bobby stood on the brakes, moved his t-bar shift into drive and, fishtailing across the paddock, accelerated — as fast as his heart was pounding — towards the open highway.

Cundalini was already out of the front door of the cafe, closely followed by Mudguts, swearing and cursing the moment he took his eyes off the kids.

"C'mon, catch that bastard in the hoon machine," he called to the bikies he passed at a sprint.

Cundalini was almost at his bike when he was stopped dead by a roar from the Toecutter. "Cundalini. Wait."

The Toecutter had forgotten the hearse. He was concerned with avenging the honour of his tribe. Some smart-arse kid had tried to outsmart them — had tried to defy their will — and would now have to pay the price. He asserted his authority as leader.

"Bubba! Mudguts! Johnny! You'll ride with me. Make sure you've got chains. It's damnation alley we're headed for. Anybody else is welcome to join us."



The Toecutter mounted his machine and walked it backwards into the middle of the street. He waited, facing the direction in which Bobby had disappeared, until his four lieutenants were ready. Then, winding out the accelerator almost to full throttle and dropping the clutch, he allowed the huge bike to rear up on its back wheel before throwing his weight forward and roaring out of Jerusalem at better than eighty miles an hour. Close on his back wheel and arranged in a flying wedge were Cundalini, Mudguts, Bubba and Johnny. Farther behind them another twenty or thirty bikes straggled down the highway.

Nobody left in Jerusalem — not the waitress, the truckie, Judy, Tom nor any of the bikies who remained — had any doubt that the Toecutter and his companions would waste the two teenagers.

It was now just a matter of passing time until the leader returned. Six or seven of the bikies, more brutal-looking even than Mudguts and Cundalini, swaggered up to the front door of the diner and pushed it open. Judy and Tom began to back off towards the rear of the room, but they were on them before they even got half-way. Almost casually they picked Tom up and, holding him shoulder high, carried him towards the front of the cafe, and pitched him head-first through the window on the count of three. As the four animals moved toward Judy, she was saved by the bell as, out on the road, the Toecutter caught sight of Bobby's hot rod.

The Toecutter signalled to the four behind him. They gave their bikes all they could, crouching down behind the fairing and working the throttles

to wring every last ounce of power out of them. They were fast overhauling the gleaming hot rod. Pretty as it was, it couldn't match either the acceleration or the top speed of the bikes which were hunting it into the ground. With less than half a mile between them, the Toecutter slowly began to unwrap a length of heavy chain from around his wrist and upper arm. As he weighed it in his hand, making sure he was familiar with its feel and length, Cundalini carefully unclasped the length of iron bar which he carried along the length of his fuel tank. The others – Johnny, Bubba and Mudguts – were all armed with chains too as they finally reached their prey.

Seen from above, the bikes swarming around the hot rod would have looked like flies around a carcass. On the ground, it was much more terrifying. The Toecutter appeared alongside the driver's side window, the hint of a grin on his face, and swung his chain with such force that it smashed the glass. Instinctively, Bobby threw the wheel the other way, almost running Cundalini off the road.

Cundalini recovered quickly and, coming back alongside the hot rod, used his length of pipe to shatter the rear window.

Mary screamed. The blood was pounding across her forehead, tears coursing down her cheeks. She felt her bladder about to give way.

The Toecutter was back beside Bobby's door. With a deft flick of his wrist, he sent the chain flashing through the window. With a piercing scream, Bobby felt his cheek bone shatter, sending a blinding bolt of pain up the right side of his face

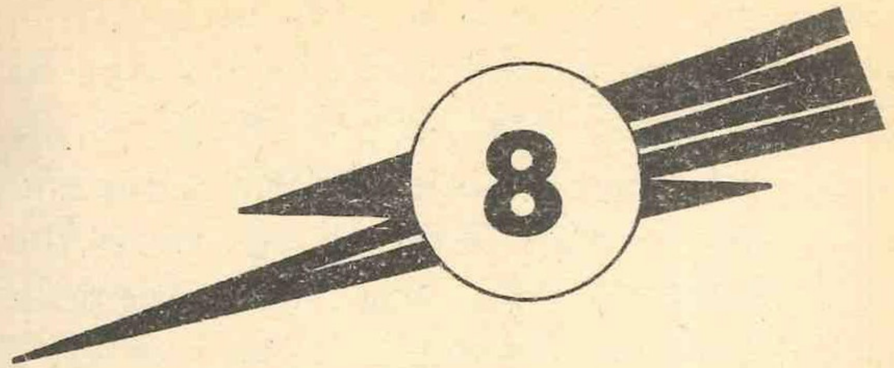


and into his eye. The hot rod was out of control, sending the bikes peeling off in all directions. Desperately Bobby fought to control the rampaging monster, trying to ignore the paralysis which was spreading across his face, and prevent the vehicle from hurtling off the edge of the road. Just in time he corrected his steering, but already the vultures, joined now by more of their breed, were around him again. Sheer, stark terror was written all across Mary's face. She was mouthing meaningless words, clutching at anything that struggled to the surface of her collapsing mind. She looked up to see a grinning face at her window and then, as if in slow motion, a long length of pipe prescribed an arc through the air and bounced off the windscreen. Once again it came, with the same result. And again. And once more, as she watched in horror, but this time the whole of the windscreen just frosted over. Bobby couldn't see a thing. Panic had deprived him of all reason and it never occurred to him to shove his fist through the shattered glass. Already another member of the gang was at his window, wielding a crowbar and trying to get into position to jam it in his face. Bobby flinched, pulled the wheel away and hurtled off the shoulder of the road, across about thirty yards of scrub and broke his front axle in a ditch.

By the time he and Mary realised what had happened the bikies were already swarming over the car. A leather riding boot came through the shattered windscreen, spraying fragments of glass all over them. A crowbar smashed through the roof just behind their heads. Hands were tearing at the

doors. A fist came through the window and wreaked havoc with Bobby's already fractured face. The passenger side door was ripped off its hinges. Mary felt calloused hands grappling her. She was pulled from the car, not knowing whether she was struggling or not. She felt gravel tearing at her flesh as she was dragged into the scrub.






Max found Bobby wandering naked along the side of the highway five or six hours later. The kid was mumbling nonsense, his eyes refusing to focus and one side of his face a bloody, collapsed mess. Looking closer, Max saw a trickle of blood coursing down his cheek from one ear and, with gut-tearing horror, noticed that a hunk of flesh had been carved out of one side of his arse.

After several minutes, Max realised that it was pointless trying to get any sense out of him, so he steered him back to the pursuit special, wrapped a crude bandage around his loins and got him to lie down in the back seat where he blubbered himself to sleep.

About one and a half miles up the road, Max found what he was looking for. Over in the scrub was the remains of the hot rod. It looked, at first sight, as though it had been torn apart. None of the panels remained intact. The bonnet, doors and boot had all been wrenched off, the tyres were

slashed, the windows battered in.

Max picked up his shot-gun and approached warily. He could barely believe what he found. A super-bike was lying in the scrub nearby and its rider, Johnny the Boy, was propped up against the side of the wreck. Tied to his left foot was one end of a long length of chain. Several yards away, the other end was attached to a collar round the neck of a naked, unconscious young girl. Her hair was a tangled mess, bruises already dotted her body and there were specks of blood at her groin.

Max approached the bikie, who was mumbling and talking to himself. Quietly he positioned himself alongside him and then put the barrel of the shot-gun at his ear.

"OK fella, don't move."

Johnny did nothing to indicate that he was even aware of Max's existence.

"Can you hear me, kid. Or do you want me to blow your head off."

Johnny did nothing, except continue to move his lips and dribble down his chin.

Satisfied that the bikie was no threat, Max moved on to the girl. Gently he shook her until her eyes opened. Immediately, he saw naked panic in them.

"No, no, no more. I'll do it. I promise I'll do anything," she babbled. Suddenly she was on all fours, growling and barking like a dog.

"Hey, it's OK. I'm not going to hurt you," he said softly.

She still continued to act like some sort of watchdog.



Max realised that the only way to get through to her broken mind was to take command.

"Stop that," he ordered. "Now sit there and be quiet." She obeyed immediately.

Max returned to Johnny and lifted his eyelids up to test for a response.

"Wacked out of his tiny mind," Max muttered to himself, noting the sweat pouring off the kid's body, the glazed pupils and the meaningless mutterings.

Max untied the dog chain, and took off his jacket and wrapped it round the girl's shoulders. Easily he picked her up in his arms and carefully placed her in the passenger's seat of his car.

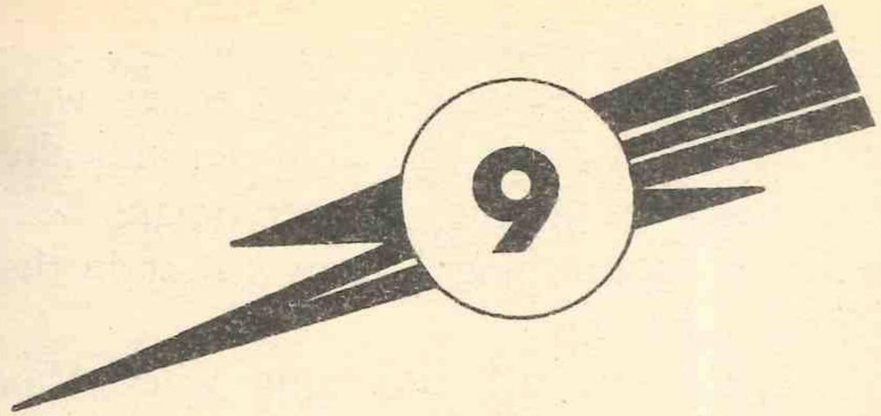
Next he went for Johnny, unceremoniously dragging him by the shoulders across the scrub and propping him against the front wheel while he rearranged Bobby on the back seat. With a heave, he picked Johnny up and got him in a fireman's hold over his shoulder. Staggering under the weight of the blabbering bikie, he kicked his seat forward and began to fold him into the back. Just as Johnny's face was alongside his ear, he caught what he was saying.

"Remember the Nightrider when you look up . . . The Nightrider ain't never comin' back . . .

"He's a rocker, a roller, an outa controller."

Max let him slump back in the seat. "Well, it looks like Jessie mighta been right after all. The Nightrider, the Toecutter . . . Anyway, we'll see."

Max climbed in the front seat, activated the sirens and headed off on the long haul to the nearest hospital.




Deep in the bowels of the Halls of Justice, Johnny the Boy was being held in a small, dirty cell. It had only taken a matter of hours at the hospital before he came out of the psychotropic trance which a combination of hallucinogens, alcohol and amphetamines had sent him into. Bobby and Mary were in much worse shape, but Max had gleaned enough information from them to give him a basis on which to interrogate Johnny. Shuttling between rooms, using the bits and pieces of the story that tumbled – or were dragged – out, he managed to get a fair idea of what had happened at Jerusalem, and in the aftermath.

Finally, he drove out there and found Judy. The gang had long since gone. She was hesitant and, like most of her generation, deeply suspicious of the Bronze, but under sustained questioning from Max she confirmed enough of the story to convince him that he'd have enough to send Johnny the Boy, at least, away for a long, long time. He

couldn't find the owner of the garage or the waitress, but he carried Judy and her story back to the hospital with him and laid it on Johnny.

Max had found it necessary to get rough with him. Grabbing him by the ears and methodically crashing his head against the wall behind the bed, he succeeded in establishing Johnny's part in the major events on that day.

Johnny's head was still pounding when Max charged him with two counts of rape, two of causing grievous bodily harm, one of attempted murder and three counts of malicious damage. Max had demanded and received, from the hospital authorities, his immediate discharge and had placed him under arrest.

That had been thirty-six hours ago, and while Johnny had been quietly stewing in his cell Max had provided the Public Prosecutor with all the details necessary to deliver a heavyweight attack which would ensure that the three Justices would refuse to grant him bail.

Or at least that was what Max thought. When he arrived at the Halls of Justice to give his evidence in the bail hearing, he was surprised to find Macaffee sitting in the reception area waiting for him.

"What brings you down here, Chief?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd come down and have a look at the wrecker you nailed."

"He's a real sweetheart, isn't he?"

"Max, I've just been talking to the Public Prosecutor and there's something I've got to tell you."

"What is it, Chief. Is there something wrong



with the case?"

"Yeah, well, there is. It seems that the Prosecutor has contacted all of the people you said were witnesses to what happened. And, well, he hasn't found anyone that's willing to testify."

"What?" Max screamed. "Who won't testify?"

"Now listen, Max," the Chief said with the tone of command creeping into his voice. "I don't doubt for a minute the accuracy of your version, but it – well, the Prosecutor says that neither of the two victims, or the girl in Jerusalem are willing to get up in the box and repeat their allegations. Nor is anyone from the town or the kid who got thrown through the window."

"You've gotta be kidding – they're not going to let him go?"

"Look, the Prosecutor and his staff have spoken to them all, threatened them, cajoled them, argued with them and damned well screamed at them, but none of 'em have got the guts to get up there and verify your story. Now we can go ahead, let you go into the box and see you make a damned fool of yourself with totally unsupported allegations. Or we can drop the charges."

"You're not gonna let him just walk away?"

"What I mean, Max," the Chief said, emphasising his words by slamming his fist into the palm of his hand, "is that we haven't got a case. There's no contest. Either we drop the charges or the Justices say there's no case to answer?"

"We just can't let him walk away as if nothing ever happened. For Chrissake, Chief, you can't think that?"

"That's exactly what I do think, Max. We're gonna let him walk out that door because we've got no alternative. That's what I've come down to tell ya."

"Chief, let me go and see these people. I'll damned well convince 'em that they've gotta give evidence."

"It's not as simple as that, Max. Our little thug has already contacted the People's Observer and demanded that we either proceed with the case or release him. We have no choice and we ain't got no case. It's as simple as that."

"Jesus Christ, why bother! Why do I bother, Chief?"

"Cause you're a damned good cop, Max. Now c'mon, you've gotta come down and, as the form forms say, 'in the presence of the accused and an impartial witness duly sign certain documents releasing the said accused from all charges which, in the opinion of the Public Prosecutor, or a person delegated by him, cannot be sustained in Court'."

"What a raft of crap. Some guy's gonna walk outa here and he's gonna just goin' to do it all again. And they've even got a form that allows him to do it. Holy hell!"

The Chief rose to his feet, feeling again the sense of inadequacy and frustration which had swept over him when he'd received the call from the Prosecutor's office. "How the devil can you be expected to keep good men in the force when the whole of the system is loaded against them?" he thought.

Walking together, the two of them took the



elevator into the depths of the building to the high security area containing the holding cells. In the foyer Macaffee recognised the slick-suited figure of a member of the People's Observer's office – a man whose job, technically, was to ensure that members of the public were not deprived of their rights but who really, at least in the opinion of all police officers, was appointed to frustrate all attempts at prosecution.

"Chief Macaffee, is it?" he said with the gently rounded vowels of a man who'd been bred to get his own way.

"Yes, that's right, the Chief replied. "And this is the officer involved."

"Good. I take it that the police have decided to drop these ill-advised charges?"

Max felt his anger rise, but the Chief got in first. "I have decided that we won't be proceeding," he said pointedly.

"Well, I think then, Chief, it only remains for you to request the release of the prisoner and we'll sign the necessary documents."

The Chief walked across to an officer behind a large desk, gave him Johnny's name and gathered up a sheaf of forms. The officer lifted the phone, dialled a number and gave some brief instructions to one of the warders.

Several minutes passed before Johnny appeared behind the floor-to-ceiling grille at one end of the foyer. Deliberately, the officer behind the desk walked to the grille, examined identification papers handed through the bars to him by a warder, and then inserted a security card in a slot

on the wall. The door slid open and Johnny the Boy was standing next to them.

"You've got some papers to sign, Bronze?" Johnny sneered. "Cause I'm sure ready to watch you." A laugh broke out of his lips and Max wished that he'd battered the little bastard's head to a pulp when he had him alone in the hospital room.

The Chief led them over to the officer's desk and indicated where Max should sign.

"Does it say there that the charges were all trumped up? Does it offer me an apology for the time I've spent in that stinking hole down there?" Johnny demanded.

The Chief kept a hold on his temper. "Listen, son, I wouldn't push your luck. The documents say that we all agree that the charges are dropped. Do you understand that?" Before waiting for an answer, he continued: "I think, in view of the circumstances, you should be damned pleased with that. You ought to be doing another twenty years in a hole a lot worse than that."

"That's the trouble with cops," Johnny goaded, ignoring the vehemence in the Chief's voice, "they're so goddam stupid."

The Chief swung round on him and grabbed him by the throat. "Shut up, boy, or I'll knock your balls into your mouth."

The lawyer put his hand on the Chief's arm. "I think that's quite enough, if you don't mind. I'll have to ask you to remember he's an innocent man, and I demand that you treat him as such."

The Chief delivered a withering stare in the



lawyer's direction and let go his grip on Johnny's face. "C'mon Max, sign the damned things and let's get outta here. I think I wanna puke."

"Do what the Chief says, Max," Johnny taunted. "I gotta lot of important business to attend to tonight. There's some people I'd like to visit — a nice young couple in hospital, for instance."

Max swung on him. "You go near there and I'll break your arse. You walk through that door, Johnny, and I swear you won't come out."

"Did ya hear that, Mr People's Observer. The police are threatening me."

"C'mon Max," the Chief ordered. "We've done what we have to."

They got in the elevator alone — both of them lost in their own furious thoughts. Max was fantasising about finding Johnny alone on his bike — he was feeling the gentle tremor through the wheel of his pursuit special as he nudged the back wheel of the bike and watched it hurtle out of control and into oblivion.

They emerged in the central reception area of the high-ceilinged, marble-floored building and, without a word passing between them, passed through the revolving doors and onto the street.

Almost directly outside, parked at an angle, were four super-bikes. Leaning against them, though neither Max nor the Chief knew their names, were Bubba Zanetti, Mudguts and the Toecutter. The fourth bike was Johnny's.

Max and the Chief walked towards their cars. As Max went to climb into his, the Chief took

him by the arm. "Listen, Max, you've been a cop long enough to know that this sort of thing happens. We've lost one today, but we'll win one next week."

"Bullshit, Chief. That's just crap and you know it. We lose four or five or six maybe for every one we win. That kid ought to be locked away for good. Instead he's off free."

An edge of fury crept into Max's voice. "Look, his gangland mates were so damned sure of themselves they even came to meet him."

The Chief and Max looked over back. The other three bikies were slapping Johnny on the back and congratulating him on his release. The four of them mounted their bikes, back-pedalled them onto the street and drove slowly past Max and the Chief.

As the Toecutter came alongside, he slowed his machine almost to a standstill and, looking straight at Max, said: "I know who you are, Bronze. I've seen your face and I won't forget it. Next time we meet, just think of the Nightrider and you'll understand."

With that the four of them opened their throttles, and threw their machines into powerful, screaming u-turns and disappeared down the road.

"So they're the Nightrider's friends, Chief. Did ya notice the tattoos on their cheeks — on the three that were waiting. The Nightrider had one, too."

"Max, I wanna warn you to be careful. This has gone past the point of idle threats."

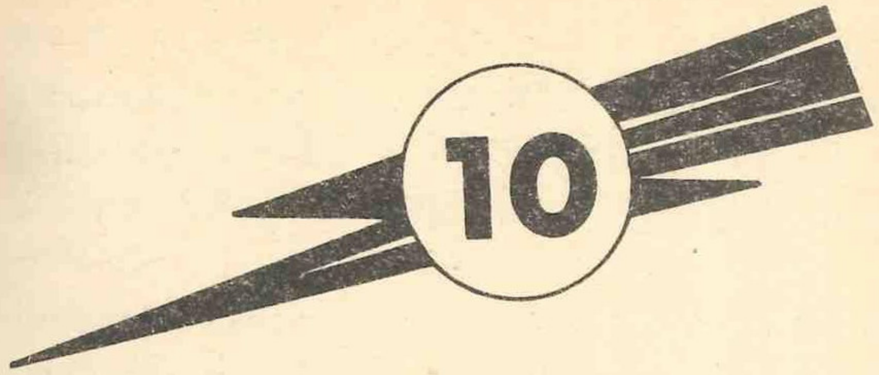
"Listen, Chief. I couldn't care if I never put this uniform on again as long as I live; but if I do, and



I've got business like this, then I'm gonna finish it out there on the road. The Halls of Justice aren't worth a pile of crap."

The Chief felt tired; worn out suddenly after years of worry and countless attempts at maintaining morale within his force. "I don't know any more, Max. I don't know if anyone does. All I can say is that as long as the paper work looks OK, as long as you don't get caught, you can do what you damn well like out there." The Chief put his hand on Max's shoulder for a second, shook his head more in sorrow than anger and got into his car. Max watched him drive off quietly down the road.

As he walked to his own vehicle, Max thought about the Nightrider — dead and buried — laid to rest, with full ceremonial honours immediately after the two girls had been raped, on top of a hill just outside Jerusalem. He knew that the street gossip was right for once. There was a contract out on him, and Johnny the Boy — the drug-crazy kid who'd refused to leave the scene of the crime — would have a vested interest in seeing that it was carried out.




Jessie was blissfully unaware of the black mood slipping over Max. She and Jim Goose's girl, Calamine, were having the time of their lives, buying party food, indulging themselves at the local supermarket in extravagant things they'd been resisting for months. Their spirits lifted as they wheeled trolleys along aisle after aisle, loading them with food and bottles, and passed through the automatic checkout counter.

While Calamine minded their goods, Jessie got the car, pulling it up at the kerb and shuffling across the front seat to unlock the passenger door. She took a large cardboard cake box from Calamine. "We'd better carry that up front – wouldn't want anything to happen to it." Jessie scrambled out and helped Calamine load the groceries onto the tray at the back.

"Now have we got everything?" Calamine asked.

"Everything I can think of."

"What about the candles? Did you get candles?"

Jessie began to laugh. "Of course I got the candles. What's the good of a birthday party without candles." There was an unmistakable ripple of excitement through her voice and for a moment their eyes met, reflecting each other's sparkling good humour. They quickly walked round to their respective doors and clambered inside.

"I can't wait," Calamine said as Jessie pushed the automatic shift into 'drive'. "I just love parties, especially surprise parties. Can you imagine the look on Goose's face?"

"Oh yeah. It'll knock him out. This is like being sixteen again, you know . . . planning and preparing, wondering what it'll all be like. I haven't had so much fun in a long time."

Jessie manoeuvered the van through the laneways of the giant parking lot and out through the control gates. She waited for a convoy of road rigs to pass, then roared out onto the freeway. Calamine settled back in the seat, propping her feet up against the dash, and idly leafed through a women's magazine. She pulled a candy bar out of her pocket and began to strip back the silver foil, concentrating on an article.

As Jessie let the needle on the speedo creep up towards eighty, Calamine began to read aloud.

"Get a load of this crap, will ya?" she said. "The ideal wife should be an economist in the kitchen, an aristocrat in the dining room and a whore in the bedroom. The trouble is that what most men get is an aristocrat in the kitchen, a whore in the dining room and an economist in bed . . ."

Jessie let out a low moan. "Oh, Jesus, where *do*



they get that sort of crap from. What sort of rock have those people been living under . . . It really pisses me off when you read about 'a woman's role'! Do the men's magazines ever run a whole series of articles on how a man should act, how he should feel and why he's the cause of things going wrong?"

Calamine, prompted by Jessie's sudden heatedness, let the magazine drop to her lap: "You read so much, you know, that after a while you don't know how to act, what to expect and whether you're doing the right thing or not. It always seems that the woman has to fit in with the man's life — that whatever he does is OK and you've got to mould yourself to suit that. And that if it doesn't work, then it's the woman's fault because she hasn't done it. Then she's called selfish or she lacks understanding or any of those other ridiculous categories they always include in these 'read your own personality' quizzes."

Jessie had never heard Calamine talk so much on what could be considered a serious topic. Gently she asked: "How are you and Jim getting on?"

For a moment she thought Calamine, who was gazing out the window at the scorched countryside, wasn't going to answer. The seconds slipped away: "Oh OK," she replied at last. "Fine really, I suppose, but sometimes I just can't handle the jealousy thing . . . not his, but mine. You know what he tells me? . . . 'Baby,' he says, 'those roadies don't mean a thing to me. They're just vacant spots to park in'."

Jessie looked at her, glimpsing for a second a

struggle which had obviously been boiling in Calamine for months. She was about to offer some platitude, when Calamine continued.

"I wouldn't mind if I didn't love him, Jess. You know, it'd be great, hanging out with him and still having my freedom. But I *do* love him, and I just can't stand it sometimes when I think of him with someone else."

"Hey, it's not that bad is it?"

"Oh, it is sometimes. You know, I feel like I'm just another toy of his . . . I mean, I wonder if I really count for something or is he just gonna run off with the next pair of fancy boobs that come his way. For all I know he's telling all the others exactly what he's telling me . . ."

"Well, Callie, you can't go through life worrying about that. You've either gotta decide that you're not gonna stand for it and tell him that it's all over — or you gotta just learn to live with it. Because, sure as hell — and it doesn't matter what he might say — that's his nature, and all the wishing, the talking and the promises in the world won't change it."

"You sound like one of those stupid damned articles — that I've got to change to suit the Goose."

"No, you don't at all. That's just the point. You don't have to change — just leave if you don't like it . . ."

"Maybe. I wish it was that easy, Jess."

Jessie turned towards her friend, took hold of her hand and squeezed it. "C'mon, you're letting it eat away at you. After all, who's he spending his



birthday with?" Jessie gave her a smile of encouragement and, turning her eyes back to the road, let her gaze roam carelessly across the rear-vision mirror.

Her heart almost stopped. Calamine was rattling on. "I guess you're right in a way. Sometimes I think I'm stupid, that I should just be thankful and leave it at that, but you know what it's like . . ."

Jessie silently leant across the seat and unfastened the glove box.

Calamine had obviously warmed to her subject. ". . . there are moments when you think that it shouldn't be like it is. If you're with someone, then that should be enough. You shouldn't have to go looking for parking spaces . . ."

Still without saying a word, Jessie unclipped a small pistol attached to a stand inside the recess and, deftly flicking off the safety catch, laid it on the seat beside her. Calamine stopped in mid-sentence.

"What the hell are you doing, Jess?"

"There are bikes behind, Callie. Don't turn round. There's about seven of them and they've come on very fast."

Calamine fought her urge to turn and look at the danger pursuing them. "Where are they — how far behind?"

"About thirty yards. They're chopped hogs with a ton of chrome — and they've all got pillion passengers."

"Is it them — is it that guy?"

Jessie didn't answer.

"Jess, is it the Nightrider's friends? Is it?"

"I don't know, Callie. I really don't know."

"It's them, I know it is. Oh, God."

Jessie's voice was low but very firm. "Don't panic. Just keep calm and remember we've got the gun and we're in a car." Jessie looked up into the rear-view mirror again. "Now here they come. Just hang on."

The bikes – six in fact – split into two lines, obviously preparing to take the van from either side. They began to accelerate, and as the first of them reached the driver's side rear fender, the pillion passenger rose carefully and positioned his feet on the saddle so that his back was half-turned to the women. It was, by any standard, a daredevil trick – not only was the bike travelling at more than eighty miles an hour, but it was accelerating all the time. The pillion passenger had one hand on his driver's shoulder and Jessie tried to keep both him and the road in view as she searched for his other hand to see if he was armed. She calculated that he would be alongside her window in several seconds. She picked up the pistol, wound down her window and, keeping her right hand on the wheel, laid the end of the barrel on the window ledge.

Calamine was slumped in her seat, wringing her hands, strangely aware of the perspiration which was pouring down her back.

With a rebel yell, the bike was upon them, swooping past Jessie's window, the exhausts roaring out a high-pitched scream. Heaven knows what stopped Jessie from firing, but the man standing on the seat was fortunate that something did. Otherwise he would have had a very neat – and very



painful – hole in his naked white arse.

Calamine didn't know whether to howl with laughter or cry with relief. They were being mooned.

No sooner was the first bike past them, with its pillion passenger desperately trying to recover his seat and not lose his trousers into the bargain, the next was upon them. At more than eighty miles an hour, the second passenger was on his feet. As the bike drew level with the van window and the driver reduced his acceleration slightly, the passenger steadied himself and bent over slightly. He dropped his trousers to half-mast at his knees and a great white arse stared Calamine in the face.

Calamine and Jessie began to laugh, tears springing to the corners of their eyes and pains stitching across their stomachs. Two more bikes were on them, and with a fair degree of co-ordination the two passengers dropped their trousers again. Calamine was ready this time. She had Jim's birthday cake out of the box and as the next white arse appeared at her window, barely two feet away, she let him have the cream-filled, fluffy-iced cake smack on one cheek, and damned nearly killed him.

The impact of even a cake at that speed sent him staggering to regain his balance. His swaying and rocking made the rider fight for control of the bike as it veered off at an angle from the van. With less than half a lane left before the bike would have run off the road, the rider managed to bring it back under control. While his passenger settled down in his seat, trying to do up his fly, he brought it back

alongside the van.

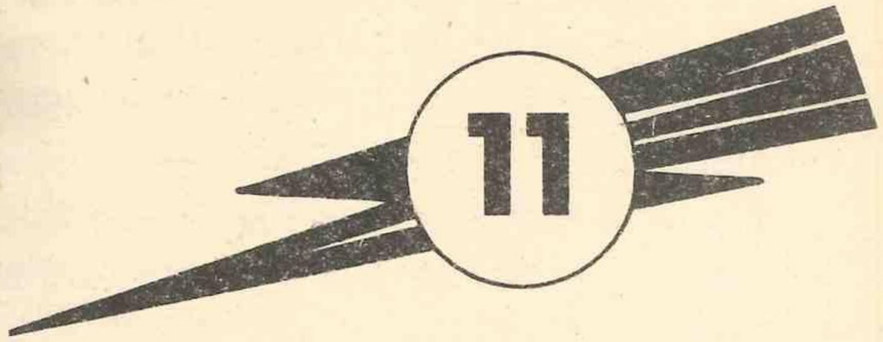
He was joined by the other bikes, the mooners now back in their seats and most of them laughing uproariously at the girls' response to their antics. Together, they raised their hands in acknowledgement, blasted their horns and accelerated off into the distance.

"Well," Jessie said, "it takes all kinds."

"To fill the freeways," Calamine chimed in on cue.

Both of them broke out into rolling peals of laughter.






The last of the guests had only just left, but already Max and Jessie, Calamine and the Goose were snuggling down in a corner of the loungeroom. The debris of the party lay all around them. Jessie had decided that the best way to deal with it was to kill the lights and only leave a candle burning here and there around the room. It was late and the clear night air carried the rushing sound of cascading waves up the cliff, across the verandah and into the room.

"If you look out there you can see the light on the horizon, just the faintest promise of it, beginning to creep through the dark," Max said in the gentle tone which he usually only ever used with Jessie.

"That's what's so nice about this time of the morning," Jessie replied, "you expect it to get warmer, but instead it gets cooler. And no matter how much you tell yourself that that's what's going to happen, it always surprises you." She gave a

laugh, a little surprised by her own sensitivity to the mood.

The conversation had launched the Goose off on his own particular road. More to himself than to the others, sitting close in the darkness, he fought to express something.

"Do ya know what it's like on a big bike at this time of the morning? It's like nothing else you'll ever know. Everything's so quiet, so still . . . and there's this almighty powerful thing waiting to shatter it.

"The bike's been out there all night and there's condensation on the chrome as if it's been sweating on ya and it's cold to touch. So cold."

Jessie looked up at Max but his eyes were fixed on the Goose, listening intently to him, trying to pick up the mood that Jim was struggling to capture and convey to his audience.

"You sit on it, and there's a strange feeling in the pit of your stomach as you straddle it, and then you kick it over and it doesn't bite at first. It just rolls through the motions. And then the whole thing works . . . all that machinery coincides as it was planned to do and there's a mighty rush through it as it comes to life. And all that peace is gone, there's a roar which sounds more — more lonely than anything I've ever known . . ."

Jessie found Max's hand and began to squeeze and stroke it, but he was too wrapped up in the mood Jim was weaving to take any notice. She looked across at Calamine — her eyes were fixed on Jim's frowning face.

"Then ya wait till it's warmed to you — to sort



of beat back the darkness — ya wind it out. One thousand cc's of beautiful workmanship gulping high-octane fuel as fast as the carbies can pump it. All going to drive pistons which eventually will drive wheels faster than anything else you've ever seen on the road.

"And then there's a clunk as you engage the engine, you gently let the clutch ease out against the pressure of your hand, giving in to it until you feel the machine begin to run. It's then that you give it its head, running through the gears as fast as your hands and feet can work, and before you know it you're way out there howlin' down a white line.

"Six inches below your guts there are four chunks of diecast aluminium slidin' up and down ten thousand times a minute and there's more power than you ever dreamt you'd know . . ."

"He's whacked out of his mind," Jessie whispered, "off his face completely."

Max caught her hand, "Sssh, honey. Sssh."

Jim didn't notice. He was miles away, riding his bike into some sort of oblivion. "Then you go just a little crazy . . . a little high. You begin to toy with the idea of screwing the throttle all the way round and just holding it there, letting it eat up the road. On the wide curves you're leaning over so far that the pegs are skimming the asphalt and you imagine that if you looked down there'd be showers of sparks playing round your feet. Before you even know you've done it, you're there — the throttle's opened as wide as it can go, nothing can stop you, there's nothing that means you have to

let it come back. And you feel comfortable, you feel strong for doing it, and you start to wonder what it was that made you so afraid in the first place."

Jim stopped. Lost on the freeway. Recapturing for a second that feeling beyond fear. Calamine prompted him to go on. "The wind, Jim. What's the wind like?"

"At a hundred and forty," he said, picking up her cue without noticing that she'd spoken, "the windblast pushes the visor against your face and it feels like the tip of your nose is being pushed flat. It blasts down your throat, rasping at your lips and scorching your mouth. At that speed something happens to the way you see and hear. To see anything at all you gotta look out past the blur and you're going so fast, the sound of the wind is so great, that you can't hear the motor at all. It's like you're just travellin' at this incredible speed and the bike's not there any more. It's served its purpose, it's got you there and you don't need it anymore. Like you're sittin' out there way ahead of your fear and the noise. And then the feeling grows inside ya, rising up from the pit of your stomach, that you're as close as you're ever gonna be to the edge of losin' control. And ya wanna go closer, you want to stand with your toes over the edge but you know that another inch, another second and you'll fall. But it's fascinating. You have to fight with yourself to resist it. Your mind's tellin' ya 'no', but everything else is saying, driving you, to it . . ."

Jim sat spellbound, caught up in his own mo-



ment on the edge.

Calamine looked at him, the love clear as a beacon in her eyes. "I've never heard you talk like that before, Jim," she said softly, snuggling herself against his legs. Jim started to come back, a little shocked himself at articulating his thoughts.

Jessie was looking at him, trying to understand what it meant, realising intuitively that Jim was trying to describe something more than just the feeling on a bike at high speed.

"Do you often feel like that, Goose? Are you always that way when you're on the bike?" she asked.

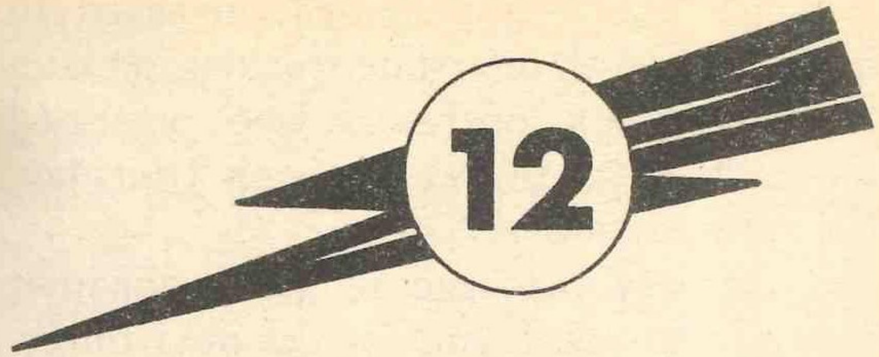
Jim looked through the darkness at her, trying to find her face, letting the seconds drag out.

"No. Once or twice, that's all. Never the complete thing — I know there's something more, that I've only been ninety-five per cent of the way."

"Will ya keep tryin', Goose? Doesn't it worry you that one mistake and it's all over — that you can only get so close, and if anything goes wrong you haven't got a chance?" Jessie asked.

Before Jim could answer, Max cut into the conversation. His voice sounded very deep in the room. "I think that's what Jim has been talking about, honey. Not things going wrong, but going the rest of the way — the last five per cent. I think Jim's been talking about dying out there. The terrible attraction it has when you're so close."

Jessie felt a shiver rattle through her body. "C'mon," she said quietly, "I think it's time we went to bed."




Three days had passed and still Calamine couldn't surrender the memory of Jim's words that night. She tried to recapture the feeling she'd had as he explained the sense of freedom combined with the high-speed rush to death that he got on the road. He'd gone away next morning; barrelling that high-class, high-powered piece of machinery along the black ribbons criss-crossing the country-side.

For once Calamine didn't allow her jealousy to overcome her. For once she didn't let her mind wander through the imaginary motel rooms in which, she guessed, she would find him lying in someone else's arms. And it was ironic; because that's just what he was doing.

Her name was Georgey Ramone — at least that was her stage name — and he'd met her stranded on a median strip next to her broken-down baby-blue convertible. He'd replaced the busted fan belt with one made out of her panty-hose, and accom-

panied her to a whistle-stop called Sugartown. She was due to sing that night at a local bar-cum-cabaret which, surprisingly enough, managed to do a thriving trade with interstate truckies, pick-up drivers and tow-truck operators who organised their schedules to catch the late show on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights.

Jim and Georgey managed to get it together after the show that night, and for the next thirty-six hours Calamine was a million miles from Jim's thoughts. So were the road, the larrikins and hoods who inhabited it, and the constant fight for survival. If Jim had been a little more alert, if he'd remembered that there was no such thing as safety, and that a cop's lifespan was in direct proportion to the care he took, he probably wouldn't have died.

Johnny the Boy found Jim's bike parked round the back of the seedy motel on the second night. Though he didn't know who owned it, he recognised it instantly as a Highway Patrol superbike, and his twisted mind slipped into a familiar groove. Waiting until nightfall, he drifted through the darkness and settled down on his knees next to the rear wheel. Deftly he pulled a spanner from the pocket of his leather jacket and fitted it round the rear-wheel nut. Straining his forearm and bicep, he exerted all his strength against the arm of the spanner until he felt the nut begin to release itself from the thread. Carefully he spun it out, using his own extensive experience of repairing bikes to guess the exact point where the nut was loose enough to finally shear off, but not so loose that the rider



would notice his rear wheel wobbling.

It was over in a matter of seconds and Johnny disappeared into the night — only regretting that he probably wouldn't be there to witness the result of his handiwork.

Jim the Goose roused himself from sleep early the next morning. He bent over to take a long, lingering look at Georgey stretched out next to him, and decided against waking her. Quietly he rose and slipped into his uniform, cursing once again the black leathers which regulation and common sense demanded he wear. Turning again to Georgey, he patted her gently on the thigh, stretched down, kissed her on the neck, then slipped out the door.

It was a magic morning — the air as clear and clean as sunlight, just a gentle breeze whispering across the silent fields. Jim breathed deeply and a broad smile cracked his face. Bouncing his helmet in his hand, he ambled towards his bike and swung his leg over the saddle. He brushed his long hair out of his eyes and swept it back onto his forehead before pulling his full-face helmet over his head. He clipped the visor into the 'up' position and, grabbing the cycle by the hand-grips, pulled it back off its stand and walked it into the middle of the yard.

He bent to one side, opened the choke, twisted the ignition key and rolled the throttle in his hand. The motor exploded into life, waves of heat flaring out through the quadruple exhausts, shattering the calm of the morning. One of those who was disturbed by the rasping roar of the motor was

Johnny the Boy. He leapt from his bed on the other side of the motel and reached his window in time to see Jim scrape his pegs on the rim of the road as he took to the highway.

The bike boomed over the first crest, with Jim flattening himself along the fuel tank and winding the accelerator out. Faster and faster he roared down the long downhill section, into the gully and up the other side of the hill. Beneath him the road was being eaten up at an alarming speed. A grin began to hover round the corners of his mouth as he watched the needles on the speedo and tacho swing, almost in unison, round the pretty little circles in front of him.

Over the next crest, into a long series of sweeping curves, laying the bike over and feeling himself suspended like a fly on the wall. As the needle crept towards one hundred and twenty miles an hour he felt inside himself the surge which he had described to Calamine — so very, very long ago now it seemed. He was going close to the edge — always closer to the edge — when it happened; laying it hard into a corner, when the nut finally sheared off.

The back wheel locked, then freed itself — rupturing the rest of the delicate machinery and totally destroying the delicate balance between man, machine and road. The bike hurtled off the bitumen and Jim's overwhelming feeling, before the panic caught him, was of absolute confusion. His mind could not compute what was happening. Only when he'd overcome that hurdle and realised that it didn't matter why it was happening — the



salient point was that he was about to die — the terror rushed out from his stomach and smothered his mind. He was sailing through the air, miraculously still on the bike, and had he thought of it, he probably would have laughed to think that at last he was well and truly over the edge.

In the clear morning light the bike and Jim the Goose hit the scrub at better than a hundred miles an hour. The front wheel touched first, bit into the dirt and caused the back to cartwheel over the top. Jim was still in the saddle as the bike tumbled and rolled across the scrub, bits and pieces of it spraying out in its wake. Gradually the continuing impact ate up its momentum. The dust settled and the silence returned to embrace the morning. Only the wind rustled gently across the barren country.

Minutes passed. No other traffic moved on the road. The bike lay crumpled and shattered in the dirt, and Jim, ten yards away, gingerly tried to move his hand.

That he should have survived at all was incredible. That he survived more or less intact was nothing short of a miracle. His leathers were ripped to shreds, revealing ugly dirt burns on his shoulders, thighs, back and legs, but his helmet had saved his face and head, and his boots had provided enough support to his ankles to prevent them being snapped.

The fairing which had surrounded the bike had absorbed most of the initial impact when it left the road. Though it was eventually ripped off, the bike's fury had been tamed by the time Jim's leather-clad body had to start absorbing the pun-

ishment.

He had an ugly gash on his neck at the base of his helmet and he could feel a warm trickle coursing its way down inside the collar of his jacket. Groggily he staggered to his feet, flexing and feeling his limbs and muscles to check the damage. Any moment he expected pain to start slashing through his body from a broken bone or internal injury. He found breathing difficult but guessed, correctly, that he had badly bruised his chest. He pulled the helmet off his head, without noticing that the visor had been torn from its hinges, and stripped out of his jacket. He walked unsteadily towards the bike, barely recognisable in its crumpled state, and searched for a rear view mirror in which to examine the extent and depth of the gash. It was a pointless exercise. The mirrors lay in the scrub about a hundred years away, ripped from their stands at the initial impact.

Jim looked down at the bike, marvelling at the damage and trying hard to understand how he could have gone over the high side – and emerged in one piece.

Dressed in nothing more than his riding boots and what was left of his leather pants, clutching the battered helmet in his hand, he walked back towards the road. Halfway there, and after several stops to examine the debris of his machine, Jim began to laugh. Though there was the edge of hysteria to them, they were deep, rolling belly laughs.

"I'm alive," he yelled to the world. "Over the edge – and back again. Who'd believe it, I ask you, who'd believe it? It must be a miracle."



And it was. A strange, wasted miracle, because Jim the Goose would be dead within another eight hours.

Johnny the Boy was sitting in the local cafe when he saw a battered Jim alight from the pick-up he'd finally managed to flag down. Johnny was astonished – the cop had survived. He was furious that his little game had not worked to plan. The Toecutter and Bubba Zanetti were due to meet him within a couple of hours. The account of tampering with the cop bike which he'd rehearsed, hoping it would win their approval, was now less than worthless.

As he'd sat, killing the hours in the diner, he'd even hoped that the Toecutter and Bubba would see the wreckage on the side of the road as they travelled to meet him. He imagined himself letting them give their account of what it had looked like and then, modestly, telling them of his work the night before.

But somehow the damned cop had managed to come back alive. Johnny hated him for that. Hated him now with a passion which totally preoccupied his tiny mind. He realised that if Jim was going to pay for his effrontery in surviving the sabotage attempt, he'd need the help of the Toecutter and Zanetti. He realised that if he told them the story he could win their support. He might not win the respect and admiration he had hoped for, but he knew that they'd accept the challenge of wasting this seemingly indestructible cop.

Jim didn't even notice Johnny watching him as he walked past the front window of the diner,

turned the corner and headed for the service station.

While he was threatening and cajoling the owner into loaning him his pick-up, the Toecutter and Bubba Zanetti roared into town and joined Johnny at his table in the cafe.

Quickly Johnny explained what had happened, talking in a soft, low voice and barely noticing the anger lacing his words. As he'd anticipated, the Toecutter took Jim's survival as an affront to the honour and ability of one of his lieutenants and immediately began to plot the cop's destruction.

In mid-sentence, Bubba Zanetti gripped his arm. As the Toecutter was about to backhand him across the face — to make the point that nobody interrupts the Leader — Zanetti pointed out the window.

"Is that him, Johnny? At the wheel of the pick-up. Quick."

Johnny scrambled to his feet and ran along the front of the cafe. He caught sight of Jim's profile as he trundled out of the town.

He ran back to rejoin the Toecutter and Zanetti. "Yeah, that's him. He must have got the pick-up from the service station."

"I think we should pay the owner a little visit," the Toecutter said. "He'll probably be able to tell us what our friend intends to do."

Minutes later, they emerged from the office attached to the gas station, carrying with them the information that Jim had borrowed the truck to pick up the remains of his bike from a paddock about fifteen miles north.



Briefly the Toecutter outlined his plan to the other two as they walked towards their bikes. Whatever they thought of the idea, it didn't show on their faces. They'd learnt a long time ago that, while the Toecutter was leader, his word was law. They were his faithful troops; it was not their place to question his orders.

Riding calmly out of town, they picked up the four-lane super-highway and headed off on the tail of the pick-up. It was obvious from the Toecutter's plan of action that they had plenty of time. They would meet Jim the Goose on their own terms.

They fell into an easy riding pattern, the Toecutter in front and the other two forming the arms of a 'V' behind him.

Ten miles out, they found the place the Toecutter was looking for. With a wave of his hand, he led them off the highway, up an exit ramp and onto a concrete overpass straddling the highway. They left their bikes parked in the middle of the road and walked to the steel balustrade. Standing there together, about twenty feet above the highway, they could see for at least five miles in the direction Jim would come.

"This is perfect," the Toecutter said after scanning the bridge and the view down the road. "Now you're gonna be the one that has to do it, Johnny. This is your cop. You sure you got it clear in your head?"

"Sure Toecutter. I just wait till he's underneath and then . . . pow."

"Make sure you allow for the speed he's travel-

ling. I bet he'll be barrelling along. If you go too early – or too late – it'll be wasted."

"Yeah, I know, boss. I gotta time it right."

"OK, get in position. Bubba and I'll wait up here, outta sight, but we'll be watching for him. And Johnny – one more thing – the Toecutter expects you to succeed. He demands it even."

"Yeah. Don't worry. He's as good as dead."

With that Johnny climbed over the bridge rail and stretched himself along a narrow cement parapet, the road almost directly beneath him. "OK Bubba, hand it down to me."

Bubba Zanetti walked to the edge of the rail, leant over it and handed a heavy-duty steel brake drum to Johnny.

"Be careful, it weighs a ton."

Johnny took it, lowering it gently to rest on the parapet in front of him, and moved his fingers round the rim until it felt comfortable in his grasp.

The minutes slipped into first one, then two and finally three-quarters of an hour. Except for a couple of road rigs and a few cars, the highway was deserted. Then, in the distance, they heard the throaty growl of a powerful engine being worked to capacity.

The three men shook off their lethargy and tensed themselves, straining their eyes at the speck which had come into view. Gradually they made out the distinctive shape of a pick-up, travelling at close to the ton.

"This'll be him, Johnny," the Toecutter called out. "Don't be too anxious, boy."

Johnny didn't reply. His gaze was fixed on the



steadily growing shape. It was travelling very, very fast and Johnny knew that there was no room for miscalculation. He had the brake drum clenched in his hand, balanced on the very edge of the ledge.

Jim didn't notice the prone figure hugging the side of the road bridge above him. The first he knew of Johnny the Boy's existence was when the brake drum, dropped from twenty feet above, shattered its way through his windscreen. Jim's immediate reaction was to shield his eyes from the glass exploding and lacerating his face. The pick-up swung out of control, narrowly missed the concrete stanchions on the far side of the bridge, careered across three lanes, rode across the shoulder of the highway through a guard rail and shed the mangled bike from the tray at the back.

The pick-up continued its wild slide across the scrub, hit a ditch, rolled and came to rest upside-down. Although the truck was a smoking, shuddering wreck, Jim, suspended upside down in the cabin, was relatively unharmed. One leg was pinned by the steering column, his face was streaming blood and he had no feeling in his left hand – but he was conscious and his eyes had escaped all damage.

He could smell the strong reek of petrol as the ruptured tank spilled its contents on the scrub; but the thing which concerned him most was whether anyone would notice him from the road. Having survived the crash, he didn't particularly want to die of thirst because nobody knew he was down there. He tried to prise his leg free, but it was hopeless. With his left arm out of action and

throbbing with pain now, there was little chance of him being able to force the steering column into a position where he could wriggle his legs out.

Jim was still struggling to free his leg when the three bikies reached the wreck. They'd watched the results of Johnny's perfect aim with mounting satisfaction.

The pick-up's wheels were still spinning as they scrambled down the slight incline after it, kicking up a storm of dust behind them and sending tiny avalanches of gravel down in front.

Jim saw them when they were almost upon him and his instant reaction was one of relief. He'd been found so quickly; he could hardly believe his luck. It was only when he'd called out to them for help and received no reply that the first twinges of anxiety began to pluck at him. His mind skipped over the details of their dress which instantly identified them as the rebels of the road.

The Toecutter walked slowly to his window and peered in at him.

"Give us a hand, will ya? All I need is some pressure on the steering column here and I'll be able to get my leg out."

The Toecutter didn't bother to look at where Jim's leg was pinned. His eyes were riveted on Jim's face.

The Goose was uneasy now. He tried to keep talking. "Smashed my windscreen. Damn silly thing to do – and it wasn't even my pick-up."

Still the Toecutter didn't say a word.

"My second write-off today," he said with an attempt at a laugh. "I wrote off my bike this



morning."

The Toecutter just stared and then, almost spitting out the words, he said: "I know. You shoulda died the first time and saved us all a lot of trouble."

Jim looked at him; realisation began to dawn.

The bike, he thought. Someone tampered with the bike. He would have cursed his own carelessness and stupidity if the waves of terror hadn't started to swell up in the pit of his stomach.

As the Toecutter turned to walk away, Jim noticed, for the first time, the tiny tattoo on his cheek.

"Hey, hey, you ain't gonna leave me here?" he yelled.

The Toecutter turned in his tracks. "No, not just yet." Out of sight, Jim heard two men laugh.

Slowly the Toecutter began to walk round the wreck, examining its every detail as he slowly rolled a cigarette between his thumb and forefinger. Slowly he came round to the back of the wreck where Johnny and Bubba were waiting for him. Nobody spoke. The stench of petrol was filling the air.

They could hear the muffled yells of Jim the Goose, but none of them paid any attention. The Toecutter licked the end of his cigarette, placed it between his lips and thrust his hands into his pockets.

"Light me, Johnny." Johnny the Boy dug through his pockets for some matches and, finding them, struck one and held it to the Toecutter's dangling cigarette.

The Toecutter inhaled deeply, took the cigarette from his mouth and blew a cloud of smoke over his two troopers.

"Now the wreck, Johnny."

Johnny didn't understand. He couldn't discover in his head what the Toecutter meant. "The wreck?" he asked.

"That's right, Johnny. Light the wreck. Just walk round and throw a match on the gasoline and then we can leave here." The Toecutter was speaking in little more than a whisper and Jim couldn't distinguish the words.

Bubba Zanetti was looking at the two of them, wondering if Johnny would have the guts to do it – or the courage to say no.

"You don't mean that, Toecutter," and, realising that it sounded too much like an order, followed it with a question, "do you?"

"Of course I mean it, Johnny. And you've gotta do it – this was your cop. Remember that. We only came to help. This is your score."

"But that was different, Toecutter. Not a helpless guy, trapped in a wreck. I mean, Christ, let's leave him here, but we don't have to set him on fire."

"What's the difference, Johnny, between unscrewing someone's wheel so that he'll smash 'emself to death and throwing a match on some grass?"

Johnny looked at him. He was at a loss to explain it.

In an instant the Toecutter had him by the throat. "I'll tell ya what the difference is, Johnny.



The difference is courage. Any fool can tamper with someone's bike, any fool can undo nuts or cut into brake cables, but it takes a special sort of person to kill someone face to face."

The Toecutter was hammering the words into Johnny from less than a couple of inches away. "Walk round this wreck, look through the window and show the cop the packet of matches. He'll know what you mean. And then watch the terror in his eyes. Do it, Johnny. And don't ever forget the look on his face, because someday someone will see it on you."

"Not this way, Toecutter. I can't explain but . . ."

Johnny's voice trailed off as he saw the absolute disgust written all over the Toecutter's face.

"You're at the threshold, Johnny, and it looks like you'll be found wanting."

Inside the cabin, the Goose had heard enough to know that some sort of argument had developed, and he was using the diversion to frantically try and free himself. But his leg was pinned fast and he'd already expended most of his strength in the struggle.

"You want to be with us, don't you Johnny? You want to be one of the chosen few, don't you? You want to be an acolyte, don't you?" The Toecutter's voice had risen at every question and he finished by screaming in Johnny's face.

"Sweet Jesus, not like this," Johnny cried and stepped back a pace or two. "I hate pain . . . they said I was a sickly kid, they were always giving me needles . . . Oh God, I hated the pain . . ."

The Toecutter looked at him with contempt and, turning from him, said one word: "Bubba!"

Zanetti was at his side in a second, but the order had been enough to snap Johnny out of his memories.

"It's OK, Toecutter. I'm alright."

The Toecutter looked at his face, glistening with sweat. "He's the Bronze, Johnny. He keeps you from being free. You do wanna be free, don't ya Johnny?"

The boy nodded his head, beaten now into submission.

"Remember the Nightrider, Johnny," he said, treating him like a child. "You liked the Nightrider, didn't you?"

The Toecutter knew he had him. "Go and light him Johnny, not for you, not even for me. But for the Nightrider."

The Toecutter pushed him towards the wreck, where Jim was making one last frantic effort to free himself. He'd already vomited once, half from pain and half from fear, and there were trickles of saliva coursing down his chin. He was fighting with his leg, trying to rip it from its prison, wishing that he could cut it off, do anything to escape from whatever horror was being planned for him.

"Go on, Johnny. Do it." Johnny stumbled towards the wreck, slowly pulling a match from the box and spilling another half-dozen on the ground. He had the match in one hand, the box in the other, and was standing at the edge of the ring of petrol when the Toecutter ordered him to stop.

For a second a feeling of relief swept across him.



It vanished with the Toecutter's next order.

"Look at his face first, Johnny. You gotta see it in his eyes or there's no point. You gotta learn that, Johnny."

Johnny turned to look at the Toecutter and Bubba, silently pleading to be allowed not to have to do it; but he got no sympathy there. Holding the match and box rigid in his hands, he walked through the gasoline and approached the driver's side door at an angle from behind. Jim saw him first when his face was at the window. He turned and saw the wild eyes and the sweat-stained cheeks. He was about to scream at the kid, demanding that he help him, when he was struck by the tortured expression on his face. That second of hesitation gave Johnny the chance to raise his two hands to the window and there, clenched in white knuckles, inches away from Jim's face, was the method of his execution.

Before Jim could scream at him to stop, Johnny the Boy was gone, turning from the window of the wreck and using all his strength to scratch the match along the side of the box. He felt it flare in his hand. He dropped it; barely noticing the flames that licked at his boots and leather-clad legs as he stumbled back towards the Toecutter and Bubba Zanetti.

The fire roared across the scrub and, reaching the pools of petrol alongside the wreck, exploded into an orange inferno. Jim screamed his lungs out just as the flames reached him. The next breath he took was almost pure fire. It ripped through his lips, down his throat and ended forever any chance

of his breathing again.

The Toecutter grabbed Johnny by the shoulders and swung him round to look at his handiwork.

"Did you look into his eyes? Did you see death there?"

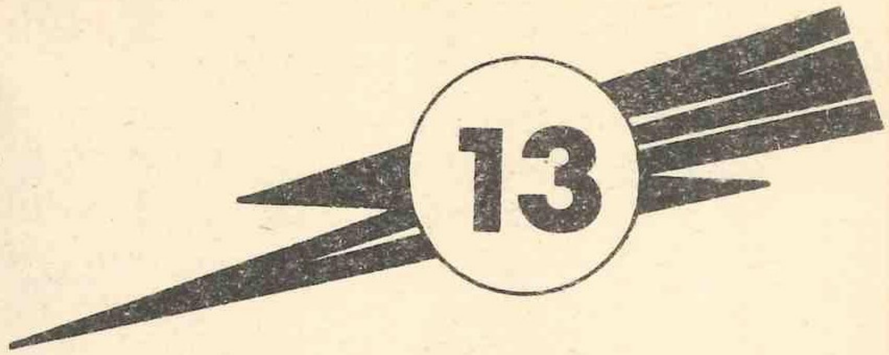
Johnny couldn't answer. He stared, unseeing at the flames; the scream bouncing again and again off the walls of his mind. And every time, it swelled in volume; until, in an agony of sound, he clasped his hands to his head and begged it to stop.

The Toecutter ripped his hands from his ears. "It's over, Johnny. You did it. You'll never forget it . . . you'll never forget his face . . ."

Bubba placed a hand on the Toecutter's shoulder. "Someone's coming. Down the road, I can hear them."

The Toecutter slapped Johnny across the face and led the scramble up the hill to their bikes. Hurriedly they mounted, pulled the machines off their stands and punched the ignition keys into the locks. With a burst of power they sped away from the blaze; but, try as he might, Johnny just couldn't get the scream out of his head.






They brought word to Max in the early evening. He was at home with Jessie when the patrol car pulled up at the front door. The way Roop and Charlie swung their bodies out of the machine let him know that something was terribly wrong. They told him, in the privacy of the lounge-room, beginning haltingly and then letting all their hate and fear pour out with the story. They cut across each other, added pieces out of sequence, guessed at the things which they didn't know and mixed it up with the terror they now felt touching their lives.

But Max didn't care about that. He drew from their account enough of the facts to understand. When the cops and fire brigade finally reached the scene of the wreck they'd found the brake drum in the cabin. They'd searched the surrounding area and came across the matches Johnny had dropped in his nervousness, and they'd taken down the descriptions of the three bikies seen leaving the

scene. And they'd had to spend more than an hour getting what was left of Jim out of the cabin.

Max didn't need Charlie and Roop to tell him what had happened. He KNEW that they'd scrambled down that hillside and stared at Jim trapped in the cabin. And he KNEW that they'd thrown a match to it.

When Roop and Charlie had finished, when they'd run out of all their hate and Max had succeeded in dragging himself back from the terror inside that fiery cabin, they sat there in darkness and silence. There was no longer any need for words. There was a bond between them now which would never be broken. They had shared in something so horrifying — fearsome because of the danger it held for their own lives — that none of them ever wanted to be alone again.

The minutes dragged into hours; the stars climbed through the night sky and a full moon cast a magic silver streamer across the ocean. Jessie had heard enough of the conversation drifting through the house to know that Jim the Goose had been murdered. She moved quietly now, wondering if Calamine had been told — too scared to ring in case she hadn't. She had the sensitivity not to speak or turn on the lights as she took coffee to them, only stopping to squeeze Max's arm before gliding back out of the room.

Later, much later, they left. The car rumbled slowly, quietly down the driveway and out into the night.

Max sat on in the room. When Jessie came to him he was miles away. She sat with him until the



sun started to lighten the eastern sky, lifting the veil of darkness along the horizon and paling the stars into insignificance. But the promise of a new day did nothing to roll back the darkness which had settled on Max's spirit. Carefully he disentangled himself from Jessie's sleeping body, gently he laid her back on the couch and walked out into the morning.

The dew soon saturated his sneakers and the bottoms of his jeans as he walked across the gentle hills and dales surrounding his home. All the time he was climbing higher, following the corrugations of the land but making his way to the top of the range. He clambered across broken-down fences, stopped now and again to watch a crow circle in the sky, and dreamt of a world far away from the terror of the road. For minutes at a time he would forget about Jim and the charred body which remained, then the memory would rush back at him, taking him by surprise and re-opening the wound with a vengeance.

He came back in a wide sweeping arc, walking along the ridge and staring out at the endless blue ocean, which folded around the hills for miles up and down the coast. Jessie saw him, a tiny, lonely figure with shoulders hunched and hands plunged into his pockets, when he was still a long way from the house.

She pulled on a t-shirt and jeans, and set off up the hill. When they met, she didn't say a word, just put her arms around him and hugged him as if she would never let go. He slipped his arm round her waist and began to walk back with her. Finally he

began to tell her a little of what was going on inside his head . . .

"I just can't get it clear. He was so full of living, Jess; and now there's nothing. One minute there's someone with so much vitality, powerful, bursting with energy, and the next there's just nothing. An empty shell . . . but where did those things go?"

"Hey, honey . . ." she began, and then stopped as she saw the tears well up in his eyes. Anger bit through her. "We're going away from this, Max," she said, voice firm and heart aching. "Our life is no good. Bodies get broken, lives wrecked . . . the people we love ripped apart, shattered, for nothing . . ."

Max said nothing. He could offer no defence and nor did he want to. He put his arms around her and she thought that she heard a sob strangled in his throat.

Max found Macaffee at headquarters late that afternoon. He'd walked along the endless corridors, passed uniformed men behind desks working on never-read reports, strode through the main assembly hall, used now only by the social club to screen movies, and into the executive wing.

The only things distinguishing the executive offices from the rest of the building were the carpet on the floor and — if you looked closely — the superior wood panelling on the doors. There was a quieter air about the wing, but Max had long ago decided that it was only because very little happened behind the doors to disturb the peace. He was immediately shown into Macaffee, who sat behind a desk far too small for his imposing bulk.

"OK Max, I haven't got any time to muck around. What's all this about?"

Max didn't say anything, just quietly pushed a piece of paper across the desk at him.

Macaffee left it lying where Max had put it.

"What's that?" he growled.

"I'm through."

"Again?" Macaffee asked, not bothering to conceal a sneer in his voice.

"Not again . . . I'm quitting."

The two men sat and stared at each other. Macaffee realised, with a shock, that Max's eyes were dead. The customary glint was gone and, for the first time that morning, it dawned on him that Max was at the end of his tether. In a gentler tone, he continued: "It's Jim Goose, is it?"

Max snapped back at him. "I didn't come to discuss it. I came to tell you one thing. I'm finished."

"Now just a minute, Max. We've all taken that hard. You don't have exclusive rights to being upset, to being disgusted, to being afraid . . ." Macaffee watched closely for Max's reaction, hoping to get a denial from him — a reaffirmation of his bravery — that he could use as a wedge to convince him to withdraw his resignation. But Max didn't rise to the bait; he just sat here looking flatly at his Chief, knowing that his bravery never had been, and wasn't now, in question.

Max rose to his feet and pushed the letter further across the desk.

"Alright, Max! So the Goose bought it because that's the way he came at the world."

"That's off beam, Chief."

"He'd be the first to admit that it was long overdue," the Chief's voice rose a fraction.

"Way off beam, Chief. It wasn't overdue that some madman throws a match in your petrol tank . . ."



"What do ya want, Max? You want me on the floor begging you to stay? You want me to start crying and tell ya that I don't know what the hell I'm going to do out there on the road without you? That my job's on the line because I know for sure that nobody else'll be able to stop these bastards before they get over the state line? Is that what you want?"

"I don't want that, Chief, and you know it. I just want out. I've given this goddamn game the best years, and I'm still alive; but I might not be much longer . . ."

"That's not much of an explanation. That was exactly the same on the first day you went out there. The only difference is that you're much more experienced now — and because of it more likely to survive."

"Well, I'll tell ya then, Chief. It's not only Jim. That's just the last straw. If I stay out there on the road much longer I'm gonna be one of them. I'll just be a terminal crazie with a bronze shield to say that I'm one of the good guys. And I'll die like one of 'em . . ."

"OK Max, I'll tell you what we'll do," Macaffee said with a voice now as smooth as silk. "You get lost for a few weeks. You go out and forget about the Nightrider, Jim, and the rest of this madness. Grow a beard, shave your head, live in a tree for all I care — and we'll see how you feel when you come back. And, well, if you still feel the same way, then it's OK by me and we'll part friends . . ."

"I'm not gonna change my mind, Chief."

"Just get outta here before I decide to come

with you, you fool."

"Goodbye Chief," Max said and held his hand out.

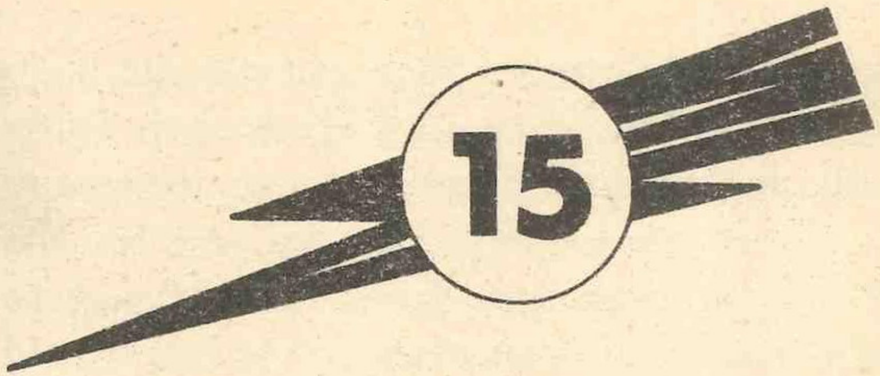
"Get out of it," the Chief said, ignoring him and burying his eyes in some paperwork in front of him.

Max withdrew his hand and turned on his heel. As he reached the door he heard the Chief's voice boom out behind him. "You'll be back. You're hooked, Max, and you know it."

The words were still ringing in Max's ears as he walked down the long corridor and threaded his way out of the building.

"What do ya want, Max? You want me on the






The days that followed assumed a dream-like quality. The weather was spectacular, even for early summer; long days at the beach drifted into lazy nights at the camp-site. Max and Jess took Sprog and travelled when the fancy took them, swam when their bodies demanded it, camped when they were too tired to go on and made love when the desire was upon them.

They were fantasy times – times of laughter which ate up the misery and fear of the weeks before. For the first time in years Max and Jessie knew what it was like to be free of the anxiety which had become a part of their daily diet. They washed away their cares in the crystal sea and foaming surf, they rebuilt their bodies with food prepared around a camp-fire, they repaired their minds with affection. Together, the three of them, in the hot little street van, meandered up and down the coast, in and out of the countryside and swore they'd never go back.

It was at some sleepy little beach, just miles of sand and a huddle of run-down shops, that it all began to fall apart.

Max had pulled into a garage just off the highway to get a punctured tyre repaired when Sprog started talking Jess into buying him an ice-cream. Finally she gave in. Leaving Max to wait for the tyre she had taken the van down to the beach to find a cafe. Max would never have let her go if he'd known what was in the workshop — a beautiful bike standing in the corner, with its front wheel chocked up, a black super-bike, gleaming in the dim light. Though it was disabled at the moment, there was no mistaking the enormous power which it could deliver. In itself there was nothing strange about that — it was just a marvellous piece of machinery to find in such a two-bit garage — but the bike had one unusual feature — an intricate design carefully painted on the side of the fuel-tank. If Max had seen it he would have recognised it instantly as the same design tattooed on the cheeks of the bikies out the front of the Halls of Justice. He might even have guessed that the bike belonged to the Toecutter.

But Max didn't bother to go into the workshop. He sat outside in the sun instead and sucked on a bottle of lemonade, waiting while the slow-witted grease monkey went about repairing the tyre.

Meanwhile Jessie was swinging into the run-down town, slowing to examine the peeling shop-fronts. She noticed a small knot of men in leather standing round their bikes on the other side of the road but paid them no attention. She was more



interested in a screen door swinging in the gentle breeze, and above it a faded sign for a long-since forgotten brand of soft-drink.

She pulled the van to the side of the road and threw the door open. Her long suntanned legs swinging out of the van brought appreciative glances and knowing looks from the six or seven bikies standing almost opposite her. Ignoring their smiles and stares she quickly walked round to the other door and lifted Sprog out of his seat.

Together they strolled into the darkness, their eyes straining to adjust to the dimness. Finally, they picked out in a corner an old man sitting in a soiled white apron. Jessie looked around her in wonder — not since she was a kid had she been in a shop like this. So accustomed had she become to supermarkets and fast-food diners she'd forgotten there used to be places where plastic, steel and chrome were unknown. Intrigued, she ordered an ice-cream for Sprog and as he stretched his tiny hand up for it, she turned round and walked from the store, trying to etch its features into her memory.

Outside in the sunshine, she stopped dead. The bikies were lounging round her van, clutching beer cans in their hands and obviously waiting for some fun. She drew Sprog tighter to her.

"Well cream my daddy's strides," Mudguts began. "Look what's turned up for dinner."

"Main course and dessert," Cundalini added.

The others, Clunk, Diabando, Bubba Zanetti and the Toecutter, all laughed uproariously.

"I see what I like and I like what I see," Bubba said with a leer.

Jessie tried her best to ignore them. She was caught between going back in the store and trying to force her way to the van.

Suddenly Mudguts began to crow like a rooster and this was the cue for the rest of them to start mimicking barnyard animals. Sprog laughed loudly and waved at them with his free hand.

Jessie took the initiative. "C'mon Sprog. Let's leave our friends in the farmyard and go back and find daddy." She took his ice-cream, swung him up into her arms and moved away from the store door.

Mudguts took a step towards her. "Pay no attention to them, sweetness. It is I who loves you . . . and lusts after your sweet body."

"Me too. Me too," yelled Cundalini and then roared at his own joke.

Jessie hesitated. The Toecutter was propped on the bonnet, not even bothering to look at her, picking his fingernails and smiling to himself. Jessie approached and tried to open the door. His hand flashed out and grabbed the handle, squeezing her fingers off it. For the first time he looked at her.

Jessie tried again but she couldn't prise his fist away. Suddenly his fingers shot out and grabbed her round the wrist of the hand in which she was holding Sprog's ice-cream. He held it firm for a moment and then with his eyes fixed on her, he pulled the ice-cream towards him and took a giant lick from the top of the cone. It was unmistakably salacious. If there'd been any doubt in Jess's mind, it was totally dispelled by his grinning leer as he rolled his tongue over the specks of cream on



his lips.

"You wanna watch out for that tongue, honey. I've seen him lick his eyebrows clean," Mudguts volunteered.

The Toecutter was on his feet now, standing close to her. Jess's mind was racing. A flicker of a grin broke across her face and the Toecutter caught the seductive implications of it. Gratified by her brazenness, he moved slightly closer just as she smashed her knee into his groin. The Toecutter felt his testicles crash up into his stomach before the pain thundered across his brain. He buckled at the knees and slumped to the ground.

As the others stood in shocked disbelief, Jessie clambered into the van, threw Sprog across the seat, locked her door and leant across and pushed the catch down on his.

The Toecutter was struggling to his feet as the others charged for the van. Clunk was up on the bonnet tearing and battering at the windscreen but Jessie, hands trembling, already had the key in the ignition. The engine roared to life and Jess, acting only by instinct, engaged the stick-shift and jammed the accelerator to the floor. The van reared off throwing Clunk aside like some toy and hurtling the Toecutter, still struggling with the door, to the ground. Jessie threw the vehicle into a wild 'u' turn. She narrowly missed a pillar supporting the verandah of some decrepit store, making Diabando dive for cover and giving Cundalini, coming at the van, a very difficult target to aim for.

He loomed up on the side, wildly swinging a long length of chain and yelling at the top of his

voice. His face was a mask of fury and he lashed at the careering van, missing the windscreen and wrapping the end around the roof rack. He was whipped off his feet and was left sprawling in the dust, howling in pain.

Jessie gave the motor all she had, barrelling down the road and racing for Max. Sprog was in the seat next to her bawling his eyes out, turning his face into a weepy mess.

She bore down the bitumen with her heart pounding. As she swung through the last curve and screeched to a halt Max ran to meet her.

"Get in. Quick," she commanded.

"What's wrong?"

"Just get in, for God's sake, Max. I'll explain later," she said, her voice tinged with hysteria.

"But what about . . ."

"Max. PLEASE!"

Quickly he ran round to the passenger's side, shoved Sprog over between them and slammed the door shut.

Jessie gunned the motor and, as the grease monkey ran towards them, screaming about their tyre and yelling for payment, she disappeared in a cloud of gravel and dust.

Several minutes later, as the attendant still stood in the dust staring down the road after them, the Toecutter and his cohorts – except for Cundalini – roared to a stop next to him.

"That wagon, was it here?" the Toecutter demanded.

"Yeah, sure. A couple with a kid. I was . . ."

"Where were they goin'? Quick."



"They left a spare I was fixin' and didn't pay for it . . . goddamned if I know how I'm gonna explain that . . ."

The Toecutter smacked him across the mouth. "I asked where they were goin'. Answer."

The kid nursed his split lip, began to protest and then thought better of it: "Said they were headin' north maybe . . . what's goin' on anyway?"

The Toecutter didn't reply. He just stared up the road after the van, then slapped his glove across the tank of his borrowed bike – Cundalini's machine – and turned to the grease monkey.

"How long before you've got that bike of mine repaired?"

"I dunno – couple of hours maybe."

The Toecutter leant over, grabbed him by the shock of hair that hung over his forehead and pulled his face close to his own.

"Less. You can do it in a lot less than that – especially if we're standing there to give you a hand, can't you?"

The kid nodded his head in mute agreement, "I need the part – I'm waiting for the part."

"Well, where is this part?" the Toecutter asked, emphasising every word.

"I've ordered it. Honest, I've ordered it. They're sending it by road . . ."

"Well, I think it'd be a good idea if you set off to meet 'em halfway and then drove back here like fury," the Toecutter said, twisting the kid's hair until he saw tears begin to pop from his eyes.

The kid tried to nod his head again and the Toecutter threw him away. "Good. Now get

workin'."

He turned on Mudguts and Diabando. "I'll wait here while you two go back and look after Cundalini."

The Toecutter settled down in the shade of the office, helped himself to a beer, and began to plot the vengeance he would wreak upon the woman who had humiliated him.

Miles away, burning the road beneath her tyres, Jessie had finished explaining the incident to Max.

"It's OK, Jess. Just some two-bit larrikins trying to stir up some action and they got more than they bargained for. I'm proud of you, sweetie. I only wish I'd been there to see that guy go down when you kneed him," he said with the first ripples of laughter breaking out.

"Max, it's not funny. And they weren't just two-bit bikies. When the guy went down I got a good look at his face. He had a tattoo on his right cheek . . . like the Nightrider."

Max stopped laughing, feeling his stomach tighten and sweat break out on the palms of his hands.

Seconds passed and then he turned to Jessie: "I think you can get a bit more out of this heap can't you?"

She pressed her foot to the floor, concentrating on the road, trying to alleviate her fear by turning all her attention to the van. The miles passed in silence. Even Sprog had fallen asleep. The two of them sat there, grim-faced, with the calm of the last four days shattered.

Finally Max pointed to the fuel indicator.



"This is one time we don't want to run out of gas," he said flatly.

"Sure. Max what will they do if they catch us and realise who you are?"

"About the same as if they catch us and don't realise who I am — except that they'll do it slower and they'll make us squirm longer."

Jessie looked at him with all the love she could muster, not wanting to lose him now, praying to a God she didn't even believe in that they might be spared.

Several miles farther on, Jessie saw the first of the signs indicating a gas station up the road. She kept the vehicle going at full bore, looking a little more often in the rear-view mirror to check that no one was behind her. The last thing she wanted was to find herself rigged up to a petrol bowser when the bikies caught up with them.

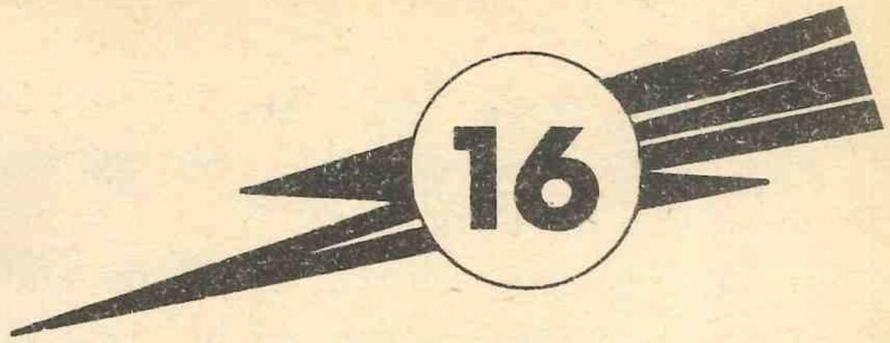
They travelled past several more signs before actually seeing the station on the side of the highway — a run-down building with two pumps and not much else. Jessie was out of the van with the hose in the tank by the time the owner was through the front door.

Max got out to stretch his legs, wandering around near the van, not taking his eyes from the road. As he neared the rear of the van he noticed a long length of chain running from the rear roof rack and trailing in the dust behind the van. Realising that it must have been the chain used by the bikie to try to smash Jess's windscreen he walked over to it intending to unravel it from round the roof-rack. As he began to work on it he

noticed a tangled clump hanging from the other end. He called to Jessie, who had the automatic pump sitting in the throat of the tank, and pointed out the chain. Together they walked round towards the end of it. Jessie reached it first and as she bent to pick up the tangle at the end she uttered a low moan.

"Oh my God," she whimpered. Max wa_ with her in a second, bending to distinguish the dusty object wound in the chain. It was Cundalini's hand. And a part of his wrist.






Max and Jess waited for the police to arrive, realising that the bikies would be farther behind than they'd imagined. Max had deposited the hand in a plastic bag. They barely spoke as the minutes slipped by.

At last a battered police car pulled up in the drive. At the wheel was a semi-retired officer known throughout the Force as the Dark One. He greeted Max and Jessie with a sort of understated warmth and quickly examined the contents of the bag. Jessie flew into a rapid explanation, punctuated by his nods, then trailed off to look at the bag again.

"Well," he said after a few seconds pause, "as far a I'm concerned, it's lost property, and unless someone makes a claim on it I say we can forget all about it."

"Sounds OK to me," Max replied. "Of course, if that idiot is stupid enough to report it you can charge him anyway as a result of what they tried to

do to Jessie."

"Sure, I'm certain they've already thought of that. We'll never hear from them, you can count on that."

"What do ya think, Jessie?" Max asked.

"Well I guess that's all we can do . . . but tell me why do they call you the Dark One?"

He picked up his cap, scuffed his boots and pulled the keys from his pocket. As he reached over to pick up the package, he looked up at her: "Sweetheart, when I was coming up they reckoned I was the darkest, lowest, meanest man on the road. I guess they were right – cos I'm also the oldest."

He called goodbye over his shoulder as he walked out into the heat and flies. Max took Jessie by the arm and steered her towards the door.

"C'mon honey, the more road we've got between us and that beach, the happier I'll be."

"You don't think after this that they'll be coming after us do you?"

"I'd have said before that there was a damn good chance that they were on our trail. Right now I'd say it's a certainty."

Max walked round and got in the passenger seat, settling Sprog between them. As Jessie climbed in behind the wheel, he leaned over to the tray in the back. After rustling around for several minutes he slipped a short-barrelled pump action shotgun out of its case and began to work its mechanism, sighting down the barrel, checking its trigger action and finally loading the magazine with



bulky, deadly shot.

"Max can't we go to someone for help?" she pleaded.

"Out here, you've gotta be kiddin'. The only cop around for miles is the Dark One and I wouldn't ask him to get involved in this sort of crap. He's too old and he's deserved to live too much to get wasted now . . ."

"But we can't just let them hunt us down," she cried.

"We're not going to. We're going to keep headin' north, stayin' on the minor roads and then we're going to spend just as long as we like at a farm."

"What farm?" she asked, confused at this development.

"Well it's sort of the Dark One's farm – or at least it's where his wife May lives now. Not that he spends much time there – they have a very friendly arrangement."

"When did he offer you that?"

"I called him just before we left home – but it was going to be a surprise for you. I reckon you'll just love it . . ."

"Oh Max," she said hugging him with relief at the unexpected chance to escape from the terror of the road.

"They'll give up after a while – they can't drive round forever searching the countryside hoping to find us. You watch, in a day or two they'll have found something else to occupy their tiny minds." He hoped that he sounded more convincing to Jessie than he did to himself.

"Well, what are you doing with that thing

then?" she said pointing at the shotgun in his hands.

"Just a precaution, Jess. There's one thing that's kept me in one piece on the road — I never left anything to chance. And that, my love, is the way it's gonna be. Now how about driving."

She moved the van out onto the road, tramping the accelerator towards the floor and finding a comfortable eighty miles an hour to sit on. Only now and again did she glance in her rear-view mirror, but the road behind her was deserted.

Although they had no way of knowing, as they pulled out of the gas station, the Toecutter was greeting the kid as he stepped out of his ute with the part.

"OK, get to it, kid, I want to be on the road within an hour," he barked.

The Toecutter followed him into the workshop but returned to the door almost immediately as Mudguts and Diabando, accompanied now by Johnny the Boy, roared into the driveway.

They had barely dismounted when the Toecutter demanded a report. "Where's Cundalini?"

"In hospital, the doctors say he's gonna be OK — 'cept for his hand of course," Mudguts said with a chortle.

The Toecutter thumped him round the ear. "Don't laugh, you sonovabitch. Where did you find Johnny?"

"He came down there lookin' for us."

"Good, we're gonna have ourselves some sport as soon as this cretin gets the front fork replaced."

The Toecutter walked back stood over the kid



watching him struggling with the bike, barking instructions, and finally bending down to take charge of the repair job.

Less than forty minutes later, it was done. The Toecutter wheeled the bike out of the darkness of the shop. Outside the sun picked up the chrome work, throwing it back in bright glinting stars.

"OK, everyone ready?"

They climbed on their machines, pulled on their gloves, checked the instruments and worked out their throttles to deafen the mechanic with the roar.

With front wheels rearing, and plumes of dust in their trail, they hit the road. Heading north.

# 17

They reached the service station at which Max and Jessie had found Cundalini's hand less than two and a half hours behind them. They walked in on the owner in force, belligerent, threatening and asking questions which would allow no attempt at lies. When they left, fifteen minutes later, they had not only torn apart his display counter and relieved him of his cash, they also knew that Max and Jessie were heading – via minor roads for a farm. It was a small but vital clue. Had they headed instead for the Transcon or one of the other super-highways they would have missed their quarry for sure.

Less than two hundred miles in front of them, Max and Jessie had stopped three times for directions, and at last found, on the side of the road, a gate with the name Swaisey painted on a board next to it. Max got out and unhooked the gate; Jess pulled the van into the driveway. She eased the van through the narrow opening. Max closed

it behind her. "Safe at last," she thought.

They trundled down the long winding dirt road, through paddock after paddock until, at last, they saw the old-style homestead squatting on a hill in the distance. When Jess pulled the van up alongside the steps leading to the front verandah, there to meet them was a woman in her late fifties.

It was May. She had her grey hair tied up in a simple bun, her skin was the clearest of any woman's that Jess had ever seen, and though she wore old, unfashionable clothes, even Jessie could recognise the look of quality material when she saw it.

Though May had never met them before in her life she greeted them like long lost friends, welcoming them to her home and shepherding them inside where coffee and scones were laid out on her best dinner service. She was, Jess and Max soon found out, a compulsive talker.

"Well, it's peaceful here alright," she said, replying between mouthfuls to the praise Max had been heaping upon the countryside. "I'll give it that . . . peace and solitude are nice so long as you have someone else around to tell you so.

"I think one of those clever French philosophers said that -- or he might have been German for all I know -- but I read it somewhere . . ."

"Anyway, it's a change for us to be on holidays and all," Jessie said.

"Oh that's what the Dark One used to think -- he used to love his holidays. But he doesn't come up here as much as he used to. I guess he explained that to you . . ."



Jessie felt a tinge of embarrassment, but Max gave a simple 'yes' in reply. The conversation lilted along until both Max and Jessie pleaded fatigue, and May showed them and Sprog to a large, comfortable room.

They didn't realise how tired they were until they sat down on the soft, old mattress and, with Sprog alongside Jess, they fell into a deep sleep far from the cares of the day.

While they were sleeping the Toecutter and his troopers were weaving their way through the countryside, slowly tracking down the van and the occupants. They must have taken at least four wrong turnings -- travelling down rarely used roads until they came to some sort of civilization and then demanding information.

Each time they realised that they were on the wrong road they would turn back, retrace their tyre-marks and start again from the last intersection. It was a slow, laborious process but the Toecutter had a debt to pay, and nobody -- least of all his personal lieutenants -- were going to quibble about the time it took.

Gradually they closed in on Max and Jessie. Gradually the miles which had separated them diminished, and at last, in the afternoon, they found a general store tucked in the corner of the road and hit the jackpot.

Mudguts sauntered in and perhaps because he was tired or perhaps he just forgot to be unpleasant, the man behind the counter was treated with uncharacteristic pleasantness. Unfortunately for Max, Jessie and Sprog, he was only too willing to

help the young men on the motor bikes.

Yes, he did remember a van fitting the description of the one their friends were driving. Oh, he was very sorry to hear that they'd lost the address of the farm they were holidaying at. No, he couldn't remember a child, but then the young lady hadn't got out of the van. He was sure that it was the van though – after all, hardly any traffic used the road – let alone stopped at his store these days. And they had wanted directions. Sure, he could remember. Hadn't he helped the young fella look it up in the map? He'd found it pretty quick-smart the first time even though his eyes were no longer near as good as they used to be. It was no trouble at all to get the map out again. That was it there – the first turning along the old Turnpike Road. Called Faulconbridge Road. No doubt of that. Sure as the sun would rise tomorrow that that was the road. Now, as to what farm they were looking for, that was a mite more difficult. The young fella had asked for it by name and he couldn't quite recall – but it was definitely on Faulconbridge Road and there couldn't be too many farms still inhabited down that way. Hang on a minute, though – it was a strange name. Like a girl's name . . . but not quite . . . Daisy, maybe. No – but that was close. It was on the tip of the tongue, if only they could wait just a minute it'd come tumbling out. Daisy . . . Maisey . . . Lacy. No, none of those. But there couldn't be too many farms, and the name rhymed with those . . .

Mudguts, for once in his life, managed to be polite. He thanked the old man with something



approaching affection and pushed a five dollar bill across the counter. The old man looked at him in astonishment for a second before pocketing the money and deciding that the young people of today weren't nearly as bad as most everybody thought.

Mudguts joined the others outside. In a hurried conference he passed on the priceless information. The Toecutter was elated and repeatedly slapped Mudguts on the back.

"How far we gotta go?"

"Ten or fifteen miles maybe, then we gotta find the farm – take us about an hour if we're lucky," Mudguts replied.

"Good. I can tell we're gonna be lucky. Don't worry about that. And then we're gonna have some real fun," the Toecutter chortled.

The others broke into peals of laughter which were drowned in the roar of the bikes. With the Toecutter and Mudguts leading the way, they wound deeper into the countryside. They found the Turnpike Road without any difficulty and swung along it with a rising tide of excitement and expectation. Barely fifteen minutes later, they passed a little used road, its entrance almost concealed by the overhanging boughs of the surrounding trees, the battered signpost long faded into illegibility.

Their directions – and all of their intuition – told them that it was Faulconbridge Road. Cutting their engines to minimum revs in case they forewarned their quarry, they were led sedately down the road by the Toecutter. At every gateway they

would stop and inspect the surrounding area for a signpost, a mail box or any other indication of who, if anyone, might inhabit the unseen homestead. It was a slow, painstaking business, but the bikies, so easily bored as a rule, took to it with rare zeal. Time and time again they stopped, inspected both sides of the road and then remounted their machines.

It was Mudguts who saw it first – at least it was Mudguts who realised the significance of the sign first. Bubba Zanetti, travelling on the side of the road nearest it, pointed it out with no more than passing interest. Mudguts, who'd been attempting countless permutations of the name Daisy, hit the rhyme in one. Daisy . . . Swaisey.

He let out a whoop that stopped the others dead on their tyres. Quickly he unhooked his legs from the saddle and ran to check the spelling. The Toecutter, too, had grasped the significance of the name, but it had to be carefully explained to the others before light dawned. The Toecutter indicated with a jerk of his hand that he wanted to brief them before they went any further.

"Well, we've hit the jackpot. The chickens have come home to roost – and what a lovely, deserted little nest they have, too."

"Nobody," Diabando added, "to disturb the fox." It brought a roar of laughter which died as quickly as it had begun, thanks to a thunderous look from the Toecutter.

"Just shut up and listen. Now we're going to go very quietly down this laneway until we get a good look at the house and then we're gonna wait . . ."



Finally Clunk couldn't resist the question. "Why, Toecutter?"

The Toecutter gave him a withering look. "Because I said we'll wait. And if I say we'll wait for a week, then we'll wait for a week. That's enough reason – but just for your benefit, you steel-brained fool, and so that you won't have to ask damned stupid questions in future I'll tell ya. The chick had a guy with her – that's what the old man at the store said. And there may be more people up there – farmhands, friends, brothers, uncles and the devil knows who else . . . Understand?"

Clunk nodded his head. The Toecutter continued: "So we're gonna wait and everyone's gonna have to keep quiet and outa sight. Then, when we know exactly who's up there, we'll go in and start to pluck a few feathers."

The Toecutter didn't wait for any more questions. He merely indicated the gate to Clunk and re-mounted his cycle. Clunk obediently wheeled his machine to the gate, opened it, allowed the others to pass through and closed it behind them. Slowly they purred along the dirt road, their eyes scanning the countryside for any sign of life, the thrill of excitement spinning through their stomachs. Almost silently, they rode along the meandering track, following the contours of the land down hills and over crests, until they saw the homestead standing on a rise in the distance.

Quickly the Toecutter motioned them to accelerate down the incline, off the crest where they were sticking out like sore thumbs. At the bottom of the hill he told them that they would keep go-

ing, but would have to make sure that they were over the rises as quickly as possible.

It was a demanding exercise — keeping the burble of the bikes' engines to a minimum while maintaining enough speed to take the hills quickly. Gradually they worked their way towards the homestead until the Toecutter, no longer confident that the sound of the bikes couldn't be heard by some sensitive ear across the silent paddocks, waved them to the side of the road.

Relying on example, he got his troopers to bump their way across a drainage pitch and into a tangle of saplings and underbrush. Even Clunk realised they had to conceal their bikes from the road and the nearby fields and, with the others, positioned his bike so it was hidden from all but the most careful eye.

Barely a word was spoken between them as the Toecutter, crouching low, began to jog across an open space to another clump of trees on top of a small hillock. In his hand he carried the bits and pieces of a sawn-off, magazine-loading shot-gun. The others — Johnny the Boy, Bubba Zanetti, Mudguts, Clunk and Diabando — straggled behind him.

The Toecutter was already lying on the grass, secretly enjoying his fantasy of being a renegade commando. He screwed the butt to the barrel of the rifle, then attached to the top of it a monstrous telescopic sight which had not been designed for the gun, but would now admirably fulfil the function of a pair of field-glasses. The others lay near him, their leathers crushing spindly grass and dry



twigs, while the Toecutter sighted on the house. Carefully he swivelled the focusing controls until the building stood up bold and clear in the cross-hairs of the sight.

Slowly he ranged the tip of the barrel along the walls, making fine adjustments to the focus and elevation as he went. He picked up the corner of the verandah, delved into the shadowy recesses, tracing his way round windows, up and down the French doors and past the support pillars, lingering on the sagging cane chairs, hesitating at a hammock and finally picking up the corner of a vehicle as the front door crept into his sight. Abruptly he swung the gun across a couple of inches until he had the van square in his view, held it there for what seemed like an age to the others, then let the barrel fall.

Without taking his eyes from the house, and talking in a voice softer than a whisper, he said: "There it is. The van, all snug and hidden away in the countryside. And she thought she could get away."

They were straining to catch his words. "Cundalini will be revenged. As she ripped his body, so she shall be ripped."

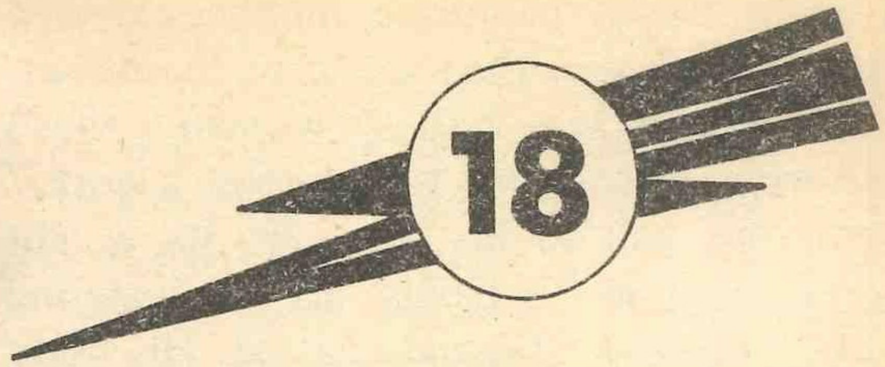
Nobody moved. The weight of passion and hate in his voice held them in a vice-like grip. "There will be a time of darkness now in this place. The hills and gullies will be our witnesses. The riders of the storm are waiting for their moment and nothing shall stop their fury . . ."

The Toecutter trailed off, leaving his words hanging. The spell was cast and all of them were

loath to break it. The Toecutter had given his orders; no quarter would be given.

Minutes passed before he pushed the shot-gun towards Mudguts. "Watch the house. Tell me when they move." The Toecutter rolled onto his back, staring up at the clear blue sky, closing his eyes tight against the light while Mudguts eagerly pulled the gun to his shoulder. As his leader had done before him, he swept it along and over the building, establishing the position of the doors and settling down to wait.






The heat bore down on them like a weight, but no one thought of stripping off his jacket. Johnny the Boy dozed fitfully; Clunk was happy to watch the crickets and ants go about their busy lives; Diabando, Mudguts and Bubba took it in turns to watch. It was a thankless task. They balanced perpetually on the edge of expectation, afraid to lose concentration for a minute.

Diabando saw May first. He was watching the far corner of the house, sweeping the sight along the verandah for what seemed like the thousandth time, when suddenly he was past her. He pulled the barrel back in the other direction, fixing on her left arm, then bringing her into the centre of the sight as she walked out the front door. Instantly Diabando was shaking the Toecutter out of his reverie-cum-sleep. The Toecutter grabbed the gun, jammed it into his shoulder and searched.

He found May at one of the windows, opening the shutters and attaching the flyscreen. He

examined every detail of her as she struggled with the large frame, and traced her as she walked back into the house. He lay in silence, his cheek riveted to the stock of the gun, then spoke to the others, by now as alert as he was. "An old woman – that's all, an old woman struggling to do a man's work."

He kept the gun to his shoulder, its weight carefully balanced in his hands, his eye watering slightly at the corner. Seconds passed. His body tensed – every muscle rigid. His eye strained through the scope, looking way, way beyond the cross-hairs. A man was moving out the front door – a tall, well-built guy in jeans and a t-shirt. The Toecutter began to swear under his breath – a string of meaningless, unplanned obscenities.

The man walked to the rear of the van, turned his back on the Toecutter and began to lift tools off the tray. The Toecutter pushed the gun to Mudguts, urgency scraping the edge of his voice.

"Look at that and tell me what you see. Look."

Mudguts took the gun from his hands. After a minute's search, he locked the sight on the van. He kept it there until the man turned around, bending to put a bag on the ground. Mudguts tried to focus on the profile, but it was gone in a second. Impatiently he waited. The man continued to rummage through the back of the van. Mudguts caught sight of a woman at the front door of the vehicle.

"There's a man and a woman . . ."

"Forget the woman, look at his face. Do ya know him?"



Mudguts brought him back into the centre of the cross-hairs. "I can't get him . . . turn around you . . . Holy hell! It's the cop. I tell you it's that bastard Bronze."

The others began to bombard him with questions while the Toecutter laughed.

"It's the cop that got you, Johnny . . . the one who wasted the Nightrider . . ."

"Maxie, Maxie, Maxie . . ." the Toecutter said in a tone bordering on affection. The others grabbed for the gun. The Toecutter ignored them. "We've got you now, oh have we got you now. Who would have thought that dumb broad would have led us here. Father, mother and child. All in the sights . . . all waiting for the storm to break."

The Toecutter took the gun back. He watched as Jess swung a towel over her arm and strolled towards Max. Unblinkingly the Toecutter observed the silent conversation. He saw Max walk – almost out of sight – to the front of the van. The bonnet reared up in his lens. Max returned to the back of the vehicle, picked up his tools and, still talking to Jess, vanished behind the van.

Patiently the Toecutter held the scene; seconds later, he saw Jess turn away from the homestead and move down to the paddock. A couple of times she waved over her shoulder, then climbed a fence, headed into the thickly treed forest and disappeared.

The Toecutter allowed the others, under his direction, to sight through the lens at the spot where Jessie had entered the forest. In a low voice, he explained his plan.

"Bubba and Mudguts, you'll go after her, but I don't want her harmed yet. Have you got that clear?"

They nodded their heads.

"Scare her up a lot, but don't let her see who you are. I want her to start screaming while she's still back in the trees, so that when he goes in he'll have a hard job finding her. Have you got that straight?"

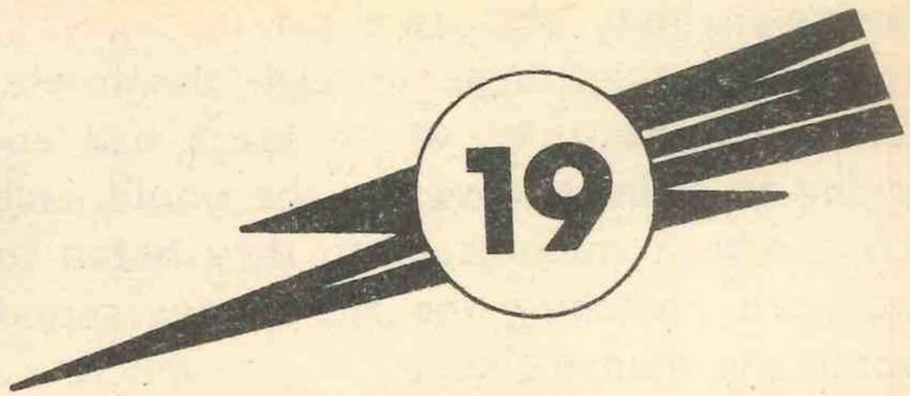
They nodded again. "Get going, then. And keep low. We don't want anyone from the house seeing you."

The two of them scuttled back from the crest of the hill and set off parallel to Jessie, using the slight rise above to shield them from sight of the homestead.

The Toecutter turned to Clunk. "You stay with the bikes and make sure nobody finds them. Diabando and Johnny, you stick with me. We're going to get closer to the house. Now keep down, for God's sake."

Clunk began to stand up; a vicious kick from the Toecutter cut him down again. "Bend over and run, you idiot." The Toecutter watched him go. Once he was satisfied that Clunk had got the hang of it, he and his two lieutenants crouched and headed down the incline to the gully. It was hot, tiring work but, when they scrambled up the other side, it brought them within two hundred yards of the house. Still crouching, they settled behind a low, tumbled-down stone wall which had once been used to divide the paddocks. The Toecutter, still cradling the gun in his hands, watched Max work.






Bubba and Mudguts moved surprisingly fast once they were certain they could not be seen. They reached the forest less than ten minutes behind Jessie.

She was sauntering along, her spirits high, stopping from time to time to look at the huge trees and to pick wildflowers here and there. She was following a lazy, overgrown trail that wound down from the homestead to the lake, which had once provided an endless source of fresh water for the surrounding farms. The fields had last been tilled generations ago, but the beach round the lake remained virtually unchanged from the day when the children of the surrounding farms had first gathered there to play and swim through the summer.

Once in the forest, Bubba and Mudguts moved with more confidence. More at home in the deep shadows cast by the trees, they found it easy going through the wide clearings beneath the massive

overhanging boughs. Dressed in their black leather, they would have presented no more than a fleeting impression to anybody who saw them.

They headed at an angle through the forest, moving towards the point where Jessie had entered, trying to estimate how far she would have gone. After fifteen minutes or so they began to stop and listen, searching the air for any sound which would give them a clue.

They needn't have wasted their efforts. As it happened, they almost stumbled on top of her. Only the sharp sight of Bubba Zanetti — who caught a flash of her red towel through the trees — stopped them from running right in front of her. Bubba grabbed Mudguts by the shoulder and pulled him behind a tree trunk. Together, flattened against it, they peered round the edge until they picked her up less than fifteen yards away and coming, more or less, towards them. They managed to pick out the trail and saw, with relief, that it veered away before she would reach them. For the first time since the store they saw her at close range. She was wearing a skimpy t-shirt — her nipples plainly visible through it — a bikini bottom and a pair of sandals. In her hand she carried a book and a packet of cigarettes.

They stood stock-still until she had passed them, and silently watched her backside wobbling out of sight. It was easy for them now — all they had to do was follow. They held a hurried conference, then set off at a fast walk, staying about ten yards to one side of the path and being careful not to give themselves away by snapping the underbrush.



They caught up with her again within sight of the lake. Mudguts stopped, waiting by a tree just a few yards off the track while Bubba set off after her at a run. He moved deeper into the forest, guessing the direction of the path until he was certain he was in front of her. He turned and saw the track winding through the straggling edge of the forest. The lake, in all its sparkling glory, was laid out through the trees but he didn't spare it a glance. He paralleled the path for another ten or fifteen yards, moving away from Jessie until he found the straight stretch he was looking for, then moved behind a tree on its edge. Hardly daring to breathe, he waited, the corner of his head barely visible round the trunk. Then he saw her — walking at an easy pace, swinging the towel in her hand and gently singing to herself.

He stepped out, legs astride, hands in his pockets and a leer on his face.

When she saw him so unexpectedly standing there, barely ten yards in front, for a second she felt no fear. A wave of nothing more than confusion swept over her. She quite literally couldn't believe her eyes. Her racing mind tried to provide some explanation for his presence. When she realised that this man really was there, was blocking her way, the first gasp of panic hit her. She recognised him. She stared. In seconds, horror came in mounting waves.

He didn't move; he just stood grinning at her.

Her mind, overwhelmed by the waves of panic, demanded she do something. By nothing more than instinct, she dropped her towel, book and

cigarettes, turned on her heel and began to run up the path. Her feet were flailing the ground, her sandals rapping out a sharp, regular beat on the earth as she fled towards the homestead. Her heart was pounding, tears of fright streaming down her face when she saw Mudguts. He, too, suddenly materialised from behind a tree.

A wild, piercing yell escaped her lips. She stopped; then turned wildly off the path and began to crash through the trees.

At the house, Max thought he heard something. He dropped his wrench and concentrated all his senses on the forest. The second high-pitched scream reached his ears clearly. Without a moment's hesitation, he ran to the front door of the van, reached for the short-barrelled shot-gun, grabbed a cartridge belt and sprinted towards the forest.

Among the trees, Mudguts and Bubba were herding Jessie away from the path, forcing her towards the house, but making sure that she would emerge from the forest too far away to reach its safety without them. They shadowed her with all the craft of experienced bushmen, emerging from the shadows to cut her off, leaving her no alternative but to go where they wanted.

She was gasping for breath and had none to spare for screams. Her forehead was on fire; the pain sliced through her chest as her protesting lungs demanded more oxygen. But she kept going, starting at the sight of one of the grinning bikies, seeing things now where there was nothing, fearing every shadow.



By the time Max reached the forest they had Jessie totally confused. All she could do was stumble, run and force her protesting body away from them.

Max slotted two cartridges into the breech as he hit the forest. He yelled wildly for Jessie – but the blood was beating a tattoo in her ears and she heard nothing.

Blindly she careered on until, finally, she saw the paddocks through the trees. It gave her renewed strength. With a speed she had never known she possessed, she bolted through the thinning bush, out into the open paddock, and up the slope to the house. Mudguts and Bubba, still coming up behind, weren't trying to catch her – they were flushing her out for the Toecutter, who, with Diabando and Johnny the Boy, was moving in from the rear of the house for the kill.

Max, still running, was only half-way to the lake, while Jessie was struggling up the hill, gasping for breath, and the Toecutter was approaching Sprog, asleep on his blanket in the shade at the back of the house. May, whose hearing was a casualty of her age, dozed in her chair in the living-room. She heard nothing as the Toecutter picked up the drowsy child and, cradling him in his hands, carried him to the corner of the house, out of sight of the paddock.

Diabando and Johnny the Boy stood behind him, smiles playing across their faces at the sight of Mudguts and Bubba sweating and puffing up the hill.

Jessie heard their laboured breath and pounding

boots. She used her remaining strength to throw herself towards the verandah — and the Toecutter emerged from the shadow.

"Excuse me," he said in mock politeness, "I think this may be your child." Sprog woke, squirming in his arms.

Jessie stopped dead in her tracks, a look of sheer horror distorting her features and a new frenzy of panic seizing her heart. She began summoning the strength to scream, stretching out her arms in an instinctive gesture for her child. Before a sound broke through her lips, the Toecutter began to speak in a low voice.

"Just be quiet, lady," he said, walking towards her. "Or I'll match every scream of yours with one from the kid."

Jessie strangled the protest on her lips, staring at her child, silently imploring the Toecutter to return him. The Toecutter walked towards her. Johnny the Boy and Diabando appeared round the corner of the house, flanking him on either side, blocking her way into the house. Bubba and Mudguts, flushed and tired after their exertions, stood panting behind her.

"My baby . . . please give me back my baby," she whimpered.

The Toecutter ignored her and turned to Johnny. "Go and get Clunk, and bring the bikes down here. Bubba, go with him. Mudguts, take the gun, and keep a watch for the outraged father." Mudguts caught the shot-gun as it sailed through the air. Johnny and Bubba set off in a loping run to help Clunk ferry the bikes down to the house.



"Please give him back . . . he's only a child," Jessie said.

The Toecutter turned towards her. "Come here, Jessie."

He watched with satisfaction as astonishment spread across her face at hearing her name. She didn't move.

"Come here, I said. Or I'll have to accidentally drop the kid. On his head."

Jessie walked a couple of paces towards him. "Closer," he ordered. As she got within a yard or so of him, he suddenly called: "Diabando," and threw the child seven yards through the air. Diabando's reactions weren't quick, but he managed to catch Sprog before he hit the ground. Jessie let out a gasp and Sprog screwed his face up and began to cry.

The Toecutter ignored the child and turned to Jessie. He looked her up and down for several seconds. She felt her flesh begin to crawl beneath his gaze. Deliberately, he pulled off his riding gloves and stuffed them in the breast of his jacket. Without taking his eyes off her, he said: "One word, one cry from you, and I'll tell Diabando to dash that kid's head against the wall over there. You'd like that, wouldn't you Diabando?"

Diabando grunted a reply and grinned. "Do you understand?" the Toecutter asked Jessie.

She nodded her head.

He ran his eyes over her once more. "Good, we're gonna get on just fine."

Slowly he reached out with his right hand and clamped his fingers around her nipple. Squeezing

it tight, he pulled her towards him until she was standing almost toe-to-toe with him. She felt a shudder of shame and revulsion rattle through her body, but for the sake of Sprog she didn't say a word.

His eyes were boring into her, his fingers squeezing tighter when his lieutenants arrived with three bikes, parked them and set off for the others. She could feel tentacles of pain spreading across her chest and tears forming at the corners of her eyes.

"You hurt me once, lady. Do you remember that? You put your knee into my balls? Do you remember?" He gave her nipple a vicious twist. A gasp of pain escaped her clenched teeth. He held his grip, enjoying the agony on her face, then relaxed a little so she could concentrate on what he was saying.

"You could have injured me for life. But now it's your turn, isn't it? That's fair, don't you think?" Jessie didn't say a word, and his free hand shot out and grabbed the whole of her other breast. He squeezed and turned, stretching the skin beneath the cotton t-shirt and threatening to burst the tiny blood vessels under her skin. "Answer me."

"No," she moaned. "No, it's not fair – I thought you were going to harm us . . ." The Toecutter laughed.

"Oh, you can be sure of that now."

He looked straight at her, slowly releasing his hold. "You know your trouble, Jessie?" You've got no sense of humour. But then, I suppose, with



a pretty face like that you don't need a sense of humour. The only trouble is – if you happen to lose that pretty face . . . well, you got nuthin', have you?"

Jessie was spared answering by the arrival of Johnny, Clunk and Bubba with the other three bikes. They dismounted eagerly, hoping they hadn't missed any of the fun, and only too willing to join in.

His audience was complete. The Toecutter decided to get down to business. He let his hands drop from Jessie's breasts and she gave a sigh of relief, letting her shoulders drop and her muscles relax slightly. Immediately he had both hands at the bottom of her t-shirt, pulling it towards him and tearing sharply. The fabric stretched and ripped crookedly from the hem to the binding round her neck, exposing her red, scratched breasts to the grinning bikies.

The Toecutter's laughter was cut short in mid-chuckle by a voice behind him.

"Hold it, mister, or I'll blow your head off." Slowly he turned, and saw May Swaisey standing at the corner of the verandah with a large, old-fashioned shot-gun at her hip.

"Don't turn any further – and let go of the young lady's clothes, if you don't mind. And you – drop the gun."

The Toecutter assessed the odds, decided that it wasn't worth it and let what was left of the t-shirt drop.

May turned her attention to Diabando, still holding the whimpering Sprog. "You, with the kid.

Put him down on the ground. Real slow . . ."

Diabando obeyed. Jessie backed away from the Toecutter and Sprog ran into her arms.

Bubba Zanetti decided it had gone on long enough. He started to walk towards May, calling her bluff, while Jessie and Sprog backed towards the van.

"Listen, old lady . . ."

"Just stay back, or I'm gonna have to shoot . . ."

Bubba kept walking; then stopped dead as the gun exploded.

May's aim was terrible. The only pellets that hit Bubba were absorbed by his leather jacket and pants; but the blast had its effect. The bikies decided that she wouldn't be bluffed.

As May ordered Jessie and Sprog to go to the van, Max, down at the beach, heard the shot and began to run for the house.

"Jessie, start the motor . . . if any of the rest of you so much as move, I'll blow your heads off. Now back off over there near the water tank."

The six of them obeyed slowly, shuffling their feet and fighting against the humiliation of being ordered around by the old woman.

She kept them covered while Jessie backed the van out, turned it round and threw the passenger door open.

As May got in, she gave them one last warning: "If you try and follow I'll blow you away . . . don't forget it." She slammed the door and, with a squeal of rubber and a shower of dust, Jessie gunned the van down the dirt road. No sooner were they into third than the bikies were running



for their machines, the Toecutter cursing their stupidity and screaming that they would waste them before they reached the road.

Inside the van, Jessie was almost hysterical. "Why didn't we keep them there. Oh, for God's sake May, they're going to catch us out here. At least we had the gun and we could keep them at bay until Max came back . . ."

May came close to losing her temper. "I had one shot left, Jessie, and you can see what my aim's like. It wouldn't have taken long for one of those larrikins to make another run at me and then we would have been done for. At least this way we've got a chance — if you concentrate on driving and don't let them rattle you."

"But the other gun, May. The one they had . . ."

"Oh sure. And what makes you think it was loaded — even if it was — that my aim would have been any better? Look Jessie, it's over and you've just gotta drive . . ."

Jessie wasn't listening any more. She was staring in the rear-vision mirror at the line of bikes which had just left the homestead and was accelerating like the furies towards the van.

"They're coming after us," she said in a flat, emotionless voice.

"I never thought they wouldn't," May said calmly.

As Jessie strained to get every last drop of power out of the van, Max emerged from the forest and saw the bikes roar down the road. Panicking, he looked across the fields and gullies and caught sight of the van, no more than a mile or two away,

hiking along in a storm of dust. He felt for a second as if all his bodily functions had ceased. His heart, his breathing, the very passage of blood through the tiniest capillaries. It was panic in its most pure form. "Oh God," he wailed, "the fuel line, Jessie," he screamed. "The fuel line's not properly connected." His voice was lost on the countryside, but its sound galvanised him into action. With an effort prompted by terror, he set off across the paddocks towards the point where the drive intersected the road.

Although Jessie didn't know the cause, several seconds later the van's engine began to die. One minute she was screaming down the road with the pistons thrashing furiously; the next she was fighting to find any power at all. The engine was spluttering as it sucked in the last of the fuel from the broken line and, though she tried again and again to re-fire the engine, the van rolled to a halt.

"Jessie!" May screamed.

"The motor . . . it's dead. I . . ."

"Get out then, they'll kill you here. Run for it. Go across the paddocks where they'll have to chase you on foot."

Jessie stared in shock. May grabbed her by the shoulders, thrust Sprog into her hands, leant across, opened the door and pushed her onto the road. "Run . . . run, for God's sake."

Jessie didn't know what she was doing. Reason had left her. Somehow she got her feet moving, and found herself in front of the van, running with Sprog clinging to her arms.



May was already out, standing with the shot-gun at her hip. The bikes tore down the road to meet her at such speed she barely had time to think — let alone aim. She held the gun tight, standing upright with her legs slightly splayed, and pulled the trigger. The force of the explosion sent her reeling backwards and she was lost in the dust and smoke of the machines as they flared out to pass on either side of her and the van. If the blast had had any effect it certainly didn't show. The six riders, now two-abreast, were still on their machines, bearing down with all the power at their disposal on the mother and child.

It was some sort of mercy that Max, running with the speed and energy of a man possessed, didn't see the Toecutter's front wheel catch his wife in the small of her back; or see the force of the impact wrench Sprog from her hands and throw him beneath the back wheel of Bubba Zanetti's thundering cycle; or see Jessie tossed in the air like a rag doll, spin back to earth to have her legs and abdomen crushed beneath Johnny the Boy's screaming tyres.

By the time May reached them, they were both dead. The Toecutter and his men only stopped to open the gate leading onto the quiet country road.

# 20

For Max, the days and nights drifted into one long torment. Somehow he had come home to the house on the cliff. Once there, he gave himself up wholeheartedly to misery. He ate without remembering it, taking whatever came to hand and leaving the debris scattered round the once tidy kitchen. He forgot about his appearance, roaming the house in pyjama pants and a tattered old singlet. He didn't bother to shave, and his eyes were sunken beneath the greasy hair hanging over his forehead.

In moments of lucidity, when the agony that was burning the life out of him lifted for a moment, he realised he was falling into a morass of misery and self-pity from which he might never escape. The most dangerous thing of all was that, even in those moments of sanity, he didn't care about it. Other men might have raged and stormed; others would have drunk themselves into oblivion; but Max just surrendered. He saw himself as having no will. He was a leaf thrown about by the violent

storm of emotions boiling within. It was, he thought, all over. The only thing that remained was to see his time out, to go through the motions, like a well-trained player who, knowing the game is lost, still plays out the last few shots.

It was ironic that so small a thing, nothing more than a child's toy, should break such a powerful spell. He was lying on the couch, lost somewhere in the night, when his hand drifted to a crack between the cushions. Absently he dragged out an old-fashioned hand puppet and idly began to rub the soft fabric between his thumb and forefinger. He did it in the way some people twiddle with paper clips, and only as his hand slipped into the glove did he realise what it was. Slowly he lifted himself onto his elbow and, using the light thrown through the kitchen door, looked closer at what he'd found.

Somewhere in the wreckage of his mind he found the train of thought which applied to the puppet. He remembered the night Jim Goose had brought it round for Sprog and the way they had all sat round laughing and playing with it. He followed that trail and found Sprog lying on the floor screwing his face up in mock terror as Jessie worked the puppet's lips and head. He saw them all so much alive, so full of joy, that he realised, with a clarity greater than any he'd ever known, that the tragedy had to stop somewhere. He saw that he was only contributing to it by refusing to go on living – that he, too, was about to become another victim of the terror which had been visited upon his friend, his child and his wife. And he



knew that he owed them all a lot more than that.

He looked at the puppet again, got to his feet, switched on the light and headed for the bathroom.

He emerged, as the sun began its long climb from the horizon, almost unrecognisable. His hair was trimmed, his days of growth shaved clean; and there was life in his eyes. He stood before a full-length mirror in the lounge-room checking his appearance. He wore black jodphurs, gleaming knee-high boots, a black leather jacket over a black shirt, clip-on elbow and shoulder pads, a black peaked cap, a leather revolver belt and a large bronze shield on his left breast.

He walked to the door, turned to look once more at the house, and went out to meet the day.

Climbing into the car, he leant into the back and pulled the shot-gun off the floor, loaded the magazine and laid it on the seat next to him. From the locked glove-box he retrieved his service-issue pistol, pushed the clip up into the handle and checked the firing mechanism. Only then did he pick the microphone from its stand, switch on the brace of radios and call into base.

"Pursuit Special to HQ control. Pursuit Special to HQ control."

His message crackled across the air waves, rising and falling through the miles, causing every police unit tuned in to sit up and take notice. Finally HQ control acknowledged him, and there wasn't a police officer listening who didn't wonder what the message would be.

"Pursuit Special here. Message to Macaffee. Tell him I'm on the road. Request permission to undertake special inquiries. Over."

"Roger, Pursuit Special," the operator replied, adding after a pause: "And Max, welcome back."

Max clicked the mike back on its stand, gunned the motor and headed towards the highway.

He began to retrace the bitumen path he and Jess had followed on their last journey. It could have brought back heart-rending memories if he'd allowed it; but he had decided, while he was still searching out his uniform, to close forever the compartment of his mind containing everything relating to his wife and child. He was, he told himself — developing a dispassionate fantasy — a police officer above and beyond everything else. He was setting out on another job — admittedly a difficult assignment — but absolutely nothing to do with him personally. There were men to be hunted down. It was his job to do it. Nothing more.

He punished the car through the miles, tearing the tyres over the bitumen, and staring almost unseeing down the road ahead. He bypassed most of the out of the way stops where — in what now seemed like another life — a different Max had camped with Jessie and Sprog. He was headed for the garage where he'd had the tyre repaired.

He found it without difficulty. He allowed no emotion to intrude as he approached it. He pulled the car up outside the workshop and, before the young mechanic could lay down his tools, Max was out of his car, striding across the concrete.

It was dim inside the workshop, the only light came from a couple of hanging spots that cast yellow circles on a car under repair.

As Max moved through the paraphernalia of the shop, picking his way through the small alleyways between machinery, tuning devices and the debris of a hundred wrecks, he heard the grease monkey call out.

"If that's you Bubba, I won't be finished on the grunt until this afternoon . . ."

Max replied by soundlessly picking up a tyre lever lying on a bench and heading for the arc lights and the voice.

"Is that you, Bubba?" the mechanic repeated as he wiped his hands on a piece of oily cloth. He came towards Max, and pulled up short as they met face to face in a small clearing between two jacked-up cars.

"Hey, what is this . . .?"

"You and me are gonna have a little talk about a guy called the Toecutter and his friend, Bubba Zanetti."

"I . . . I've never heard of them."

Max's gloved hand shot out and caught him full-fist on the cheek-bone. "Of course you haven't, you just call everyone Bubba don't you? And you always help bikies who roll in looking for people, don't you?" Max grabbed him by the shirt and



brought the tyre lever into his line of vision. "Now I want to know about these tattooed hoons and who else was with them. OK?"

The mechanic screwed up his face, his eyes darting to the tyre lever. "Look, man, I just mind my own business. I don't know nothin'."

Max swung the lever down on the kid's forearm, feeling the jolt through his own body as it bounced off bone. The kid howled in pain and tears sprang from his eyes.

Once the grease monkey regained his presence of mind he began to whimper. "They'll kill me, honest. I dunno what they done, but they'll waste me if they find out I as much as talked to you. Listen mister, I didn't know you were a cop . . ."

Max lifted the tyre lever again and felt the kid shake in his grip. "First off, we'll get the names straight. I'll get you started, right?"

The kid couldn't take his eyes off the metal bar.

"The leader's the Toecutter, right?" The kid nodded. "And one of his lieutenants was called the Nightrider, except that he's dead?" He nodded again.

"And then," Max continued, "we've got Bubba Zanetti and somebody called Johnny the Boy. Who else?"

The mechanic began to waver about the wisdom of telling the Bronze any more. Max tightened his grip on his overalls and began to swing the tyre lever through a full arc.

"NO! Don't . . . there's Diabando, and another one called Mudguts." It was as if he was mesmerised by the lever hanging in the air and threatening

at any moment to split his skull. "And Clunk, he's pretty simple. That's the lot – the inner circle . . ."

Max dropped the lever towards the crown of the grease monkey's head. "Honest, I swear to God. 'Cept for Cundalini and he's in hospital . . . he ain't got a hand no more . . ."

Max threw him aside, leaving him sprawled across the bonnet nursing his smashed arm. He began to walk out of the workshop, still carrying the tyre lever, when suddenly he stopped, swung on his heel and retraced his steps. The kid began to cower away, tried to climb over the car, lost his footing and fell, spreadeagled on the bonnet with Max standing over him.

"Where will I find them?"

The kid began to blubber.

Max tore into him with his eyes.

"The Coast Highway. About thirty miles north is their turf . . . they always end up there, or at some of the beaches nearby."

Max had finished with him.

It took several hours and an enormous amount of luck, but he discovered them at a tiny resort town, forty-odd miles up the coast. When he left the garage he decided that his most sensible course was to follow the old, minor road that linked the straggling beachside townships, then backtrack down the Coast Highway until he found them. He'd almost decided to give the beaten-up road away, and was ready to retrace his steps on the highway when he noticed a decayed sign indicating two townships within the next ten miles. Maybe it was just the feeling that gamblers sometimes get



before they pick up their hand, maybe it was simply the determination of a good cop; but Max tramped his foot down and headed farther north.

He was in and out of the first township before he could blink. It was no more than a straggling line of decrepit old shops that looked as though they'd been deserted for years. The next, though still only a tiny dot on any map, was more substantial. It had grown around an intersection and possessed an air of vitality. Cars were parked in the street, houses dotted a far hillside with a panoramic view over a pretty little cove, and on the beach children were playing at the water's edge.

Max slowed his car, searching the verandahs – a couple of women were going about their shopping; he turned to examine the rest of the town and, almost immediately, he saw them. Six black superbikes parked in a line out the front of the Bayview Hotel.

They could, of course, have belonged to anyone, but he knew by all his instincts that he'd found what he was looking for. He didn't feel any excitement or fear. It was as if an important piece of machinery had been at last fitted into place. Without emotion, his mind – like an efficient, smoothly functioning mechanism – began to compute all the variables and churn out answers.

He drove past the hotel, accelerating so that he was on the other side as quickly as possible without drawing attention to himself. A couple of hundred yards up the street, he found exactly what he was looking for – a side alley opposite the hotel. He cruised past it, slid the car into reverse

and rolled in, with the car's nose facing the street. He was far enough back in the alley to avoid any but the most careful scrutiny, yet he could still see the bikes.

Max waited, without taking his eyes off the front door of the hotel. Noon came and went. Men drifted into town and sought out the bar for a drink or a counter lunch. The car was oppressively hot, but Max didn't shed any of his uniform. He still looked as though he was on parade.

The lunch-hour drinkers had drifted away by the time his prey emerged. They stumbled out the door, pushing each other and staggering slightly in the bright sunlight. Max's mind accepted and processed the information: they'd obviously been there all morning and were far enough gone to be careless. He didn't move. As they mounted their bikes he picked out those he could identify and tried to pin names on the others.

With the Toecutter leading the way, they backed out unsteadily, and turned their machines through ninety degrees to face up the road. Drunk they might have been, but they could still hold the bikes upright and kick over the starters. With a more or less simultaneous roar, the engines burst into life and they wound out the throttles. They passed the spot — where Max was sitting in his Pursuit Special — without so much as a sideways glance, and headed for the Coast Highway.

Max knew he'd feel at home out there on the open asphalt. He eased the car into the street, allowing them plenty of space, then set off sedately behind. Way ahead, across several dips and curves



in the road, he could see them bunched together. Making an accurate estimate of their speed, he let his needle hover around seventy-five. Not too fast to overtake them, but not slow enough to let them get away.

Although the rush of air and speed started to restore some sort of order to their jangled brains, none of the gang bothered to look behind. After all, wasn't this their territory?

Max burbled along, losing them from sight for minutes on end but always spotting them again. As if locked together by an invisible bond, the car and bikes churned through the countryside to the intersection of the access road and the Coast Highway.

At last, in the distance, Max could see the eight-laned bitumen threaded across the landscape. He pushed his foot down, closing the gap between him and his quarry. The one thing he didn't want was to turn the wrong way on the highway and lose them. Once again he was in luck.

The access road swept up a hill, then ran as straight as a die on the other side till it joined the highway. Just over the crest Max tramped on his brakes, threw his car into reverse and rocketed backwards onto the gravel of the shoulder at the top. He sat there watching. The six bikes beetled closer and closer to the wide ribbon of asphalt, and, finally reaching it, turned their wheels to the north.

He leant forward and twisted the key in the ignition. They were on the open highway now, and only the law of the road would apply.

He swung to the centre of the road, tramped his foot to the floor, and silently sung the praise of the mechanics who'd put his monstrous machine together. He was hitting a hundred and forty miles an hour — with more in reserve — when he sighted them again. His car thundered down the highway and they were clearer by the second, spread across two lanes, travelling no better than the ton.

He closed on them at an incredible speed; the nose of his vehicle flattened over the road, the spoilers keeping his rear end clamped tight. The massive wheels and the blasting engine created a deafening roar, even in the steel cocoon of the cabin. Max sat back, arms straight, holding the wheel lightly in his hands. He swept over a crest, seeing them plainly in the dip below him, and aimed the car between the two files, hoping to take them at once — the way a bowling ball drops the skittles in a strike.

Maybe the noise, maybe a sixth road-sense made Mudguts, riding at the back, look in his rear-view mirror. He saw Max hurtling down the hill behind them. Thinking quickly — an incredible achievement considering the amount of beer he'd drunk — he opened his throttle, threw the bike to his right and screamed through the middle of the other five, yelling and tossing his head behind him. As soon as he was through the pack, he veered off to the left and headed for the shoulder of the road, guessing that, at that speed, their pursuer would be loath to follow. Realising that Mudguts wasn't just skylarking, the others looked in their mirrors — within a second of each other — to find the hurtling black



projectile almost upon them. In a panic they peeled off in all directions, hurling their weight against the frames of their bikes, laying them over till the sparks flew from their toe-caps.

Max didn't miss them all. He caught Johnny the Boy's rear wheel with his front guard and sent him careering out of control up the road, across the outside lane, over the gravel and into a tumbling, sprawling mess in the scrub. Before he knew it, Max was through the scattered pack. His mind computed the new information and told him to keep going. He had all the time in the world.

The five who were still on their bikes became suddenly very, very sober. They watched Max disappear into the distance as if he were chasing the world land speed record, then gathered in a knot at the roadside, slowly turned about and rode down the gravel, each keeping an eye pinned on his mirror — to the spot where Johnny lay prone in the dirt.

With encouragement, Johnny managed to raise himself to a sitting position, nursing his bruised chest and tentatively feeling the grazes and abrasions that mottled his body. The bike was in much worse shape than he was and, after a few abortive attempts to get it upright, they gave it away.

The Toecutter took command. "Johnny, you'll have to wait here while we go and teach our friend a lesson he won't live to remember."

Johnny nodded his head, thankful he'd have a chance to recover in peace.

The others leapt onto their bikes and rolled over the scrub and gravel.

"Alright," the Toecutter said, "let's take the boy racer." His front wheel hit the tarmac and a shower of gravel sprayed over his following lieutenants.

Max was miles ahead of them. He had picked his spot carefully. The road crossed a river – about thirty feet below – then swung into a long, tight left-hand curve. He parked on the side of the road, then scrambled up a steep hill from which he could see for miles down the road. He stood on top of the ridge, an imposing figure in his all-black uniform, and searched the asphalt for the first sight of them.

Idly he played with the butt of the revolver at his hip, watching and waiting. Then he saw them. Without any haste, he clambered down the hill, walked along the road till he could see the bridge. He fixed his sight on a spot several miles beyond it; the calculator in his skull told him that when he saw them there he'd have to move.

Patiently he waited; when the Toecutter passed his mark, he turned on his heel and sprinted. He had left the door open; by the time he'd snapped it shut he had the engine started, letting the revs build up to a frightening crescendo before he set the beast free.

The five hoons thundered onto the bridge at close to one hundred and twenty miles an hour. Max was travelling considerably slower, but he had surprise on his side.

The calculator hadn't let him down. He was out of the curve and dead in front of them before they realised what was happening. The Toecutter



managed, with lucky driving, to avoid the black monster by a few inches. Clunk and Diabando weren't so fortunate.

Clunk threw his bike to the right, and felt the front fender take off his rear wheel. He was soaring and somersaulting through the air, looking for all the world as though he'd been drop-kicked over the parapet of the bridge. Clunk was alive the moment before he hit the water, and dead the moment after. The force of the impact, the trajectory of his flight into space, the speed at which he spun, the angle at which his body hit the water all added up to a very simple result: he snapped his neck.

Diabando avoided Max's wild onslaught. He braked, veered to the right and, seeing the guard rail looming straight in front of him, attempted to eject himself from his seat. Whether propelled by agility or the crashing impact as the front forks buried themselves in the steel rail, Diabando, too, somersaulted through the air – hitting the water – feet first, and breaking his leg. His unconscious body floated, face up, with the current.

Max heard, weeks later, that the young larrikin had dragged himself ashore miles downstream and, otherwise unharmed, had spent almost three days nursing his broken leg before he was lucky enough to be found by a group of hunters. Gangrene had set into his infected leg, and the doctors amputated it above the knee.

But Max didn't spare a thought for Diabando as he spun like a doll in the air. The impact of the collision with Clunk had ruined his aim and

allowed Mudguts and Bubba Zanetti to take wild, evasive action.

Once again Max was past the pack, and the Toecutter and his two lieutenants had recovered their equilibrium. With barely a sideways glance at the spot on the bridge where their mates disappeared, they laid their bikes into the long sweeping curve.

Max brought his thundering machine to a halt, swung it into a tight u-turn and roared back to the centre of the bridge. Calmly he stepped out of the car and strode to the parapet where the remains of Diabando's bike were wedged between the steel struts. He looked down and saw the two bodies floating lazily apart in the water, allowed his mind to absorb the information, and returned to his car.

The Toecutter was toying with the idea of stopping to confer with his two remaining troopers when he picked up the black dot of Max's duco in the rear-view mirror.

"This is no boy racer after all," he thought; and, as he paid grudging admiration to the talent, cunning and tenacity of their tormentor, realisation dawned. He cursed himself for his stupidity. There was only one person it could be, of course. Only one person with the ability — and the reason — to take them on — and do it so well. It was the Bronze. It was Max.

Mad Max and the Toecutter doing battle on the bitumen. It had to happen, he thought. Everything had led to this.

Once the Toecutter realised who was behind them, he ditched the idea of stopping to give Mudguts and Bubba their orders. He had to keep going, keep heading north, until he got enough distance between them to plot and plan without any fear of the Bronze surprising them.

He opened his throttle and grinned as the other two followed suit. The trio gave their machines everything they could, lying flat on their petrol tanks to reduce the amount of wind-drag and going straight in and out of the curves. Slowly, steadily they managed to draw away from Max — not because their machines were any faster but simply because they were able to get into the curves and corners more quickly. Max knew, as he watched them gaining ever so slightly on him, that they were far nearer the edge than he was.

As the sun began to slip lower in the sky, the caravan of bikes and car entered a spectacular section of country which Max had never travelled

before. The road narrowed and climbed and dipped steeply, cutting its way through the foothills, leading always higher, twisting and turning all the way until Max finally lost sight of his quarry.

It was the moment the Toecutter had been waiting for; he sighed with relief. Despite the near-panic which had seized him when he saw Max's car come thundering around the curve, he'd spent most of the miles since then thinking of a way to free himself from the angel of death on his tail. He knew that he had to do it soon or lose the chance forever – and with it his life.

Good furtune played into his hands. Just ahead he saw a sedan trundling along at a respectable seventy miles an hour – he knew he'd found what he was looking for. He led Mudguts and Bubba into the passing lane and, with a hand signal, indicated that they were going to force the day-trippers off the road. They'd done it countless times before, and had no trouble now. With the bikes ranged along one side, chains swinging in their hands, they steered the sedan onto the side of the road, in much the same way as an experienced cowboy could separate a steer from the pack.

The driver and his wife – both in their fifties – sat in mute terror inside their car. Quickly the Toecutter pulled his sawn-off shot-gun from his saddle-bag and, using it to keep his hostages under control, explained his plan to the other two.

Giving terse orders, and leaving no doubt in the couple's mind as to what would happen to them if they didn't co-operate, he got the man to move his car. Mudguts dropped his bike in the gravel at the



start of the next tight curve, got down on his hands and knees and entwined himself in the machine, ripping his clothes, smearing his face with dust, then falling limp. The Toecutter ordered the man and woman to bend over and act as if they were tending him.

"Just kneel down there and make it look good. Understand?" The old couple nodded with a mixture of confusion and panic.

"Make it look better," the Toecutter roared at them, pointing the barrel of the shot-gun at their heads.

They took to their task with all the enthusiasm and ability they could muster.

"Me and my friend here," the Toecutter continued, "are gonna be up on that hillside there with our guns trained on you. Any attempt to warn anybody that stops to help will be like signing your own death warrant. I'll go for the lady first, and then you. Do you understand?" Again they nodded.

Bubba Zanetti led the way, scrambling up to take his position behind a large boulder. The Toecutter went farther north, where he had a clear line of fire down the road. Before flattening himself on the earth he looked around, checking that the other bikes were totally concealed, that his two hostages were playing their part properly and that the snout of Bubba Zanetti's long-barrelled pistol couldn't be seen.

Then they waited.

Max had a scant couple of hundred yards in which to see them, and his first reaction was to

keep going; but the look on the old man's face as he tried to flag him down and the sight of the woman struggling to lift the bike off the rider changed his mind.

As he slowed his car, he allowed his mind to calculate all the information. The bike rider, undoubtedly one of those he'd been chasing, had obviously been going far too fast to take the bend and had run off the road. The others, knowing he was behind, and knowing their comrade had probably been killed, would have kept going. The old couple must have come across the accident shortly after the bikes had passed them.

Max allowed the car to roll to a halt and then backed up, stopping thirty yards from the wreckage. He didn't move from his seat. He examined every part of the road and surrounding hillsides until he had satisfied himself that his assessment of the circumstances was correct, and only then picked the shot-gun up off the seat, loosened his pistol in its holster and slowly got out of the car.

He was half-way towards the wreck, where the old man stood waiting for him, when Bubba Zanetti fired the first shot. Max's left leg exploded underneath him. His knee-cap flew off in tiny pieces as the bullet tore through flesh and bone; but, as Max's body collapsed, his mind went to work. The impact had thrown him to the ground and rolled him over; he just kept going. Zanetti fired again, and missed, standing up now and allowing Max to see him clearly against the white rubble behind him. Max had dropped his shot-gun, but as



he rolled towards the edge of the bitumen his right hand was already searching for his holster.

Zanetti fired again, hitting the road just in front of Max's face. Pieces of bitumen lacerated his forehead. Max was in the gravel now, and to the side he could see Mudguts trying to disentangle himself from his bike. The old couple were running willy-nilly for their car as Max turned one more time, pulled the pistol out in front of him and, from less than fifteen yards, pumped three shots into Mudguts' writhing body.

"No glory there," he thought as he heaved himself over on his side and bumped down a slight incline.

Although he didn't know it, he was well out of the Toecutter's view; but Zanetti, scrambling down the hillside, blasted off another couple of quick, wild shots. Max swung his arm round, calculated where Zanetti's feet would fall next and squeezed the trigger twice in quick succession.

The first bullet shattered Zanetti's chest, and if there was any life left in him as his knees buckled it was gone the instant the second bullet took the top off his head.

Max lay motionless, waves of pain sweeping up from his shattered leg and threatening to engulf him. He felt himself slipping into unconsciousness, his presence of mind deserting him faster than the blood which rolled out of the gaping wound on his knee.

Ironically, it was the Toecutter who brought him back from the brink. The leader had seen both his lieutenants shot dead and, though he knew that

Max was wounded, didn't like his chances of making a position where he could get his aim without being hit first. Had he known how badly wounded Max was he would have gone in for the kill, but in the few frantic moments which had just passed he accepted unquestioningly that Zanetti had only managed to inflict a flesh wound.

Instead of taking his time and calmly executing Max, he backed off quickly, creeping low towards the hidden bikes; silently he mounted his machine. It was the sudden roar of the giant engine which held Max this side of reality — a small thing, but enough. Max's mind latched onto the sound. The computer in his head overtook the pain and fright and told him his work wasn't finished. Max heard the growl as the engine roared off into the late afternoon and began to drag himself slowly to his feet.

Using all the authority he could command, he yelled at the cowering old people. Nervously they approached, afraid he was about to wreak vengeance on them, but certain that if they didn't help he would have no compunction about shooting them.

Max didn't say a word. He just draped his arms around their shoulders and got them to steer him to his car. Once there, he half fell and half stepped into the seat, dragged his tortured body round, and, more by an effort of will than anything else, started the car.

Using his one good foot to operate both the accelerator and the brake, he roared off, spinning the old couple off their feet in a shower of dust.



Barely seeing the road and caring little about his own safety, he pursued the Toecutter. Through the blanket of pain tightening round him he noticed that the bitumen was narrowing, turning from a highway into a single-lane each-way mountain road. The median strip disappeared and was replaced by double yellow lines. He fixed his eyes on them and forced himself to follow their every curve.

Made reckless by the pain, Max was throwing his car through the curves at a good twenty miles an hour faster than the bike.

The Toecutter was having a difficult time of it, trying to get as much speed as he could out of the machine and while keeping watch in the rear-view mirror. It was almost with relief that he saw Max tear into sight less than a mile behind him. At least now he knew where he was.

Max lined up the small of the Toecutter's back with the small insignia standing on the front of his bonnet. He had his foot almost to the floor and was bearing down on his prey with all the ferocity of a sparrow-hawk in full majestic flight. He was within a couple of feet of the Toecutter as they swept into a long, climbing curve. Panic seized the Toecutter's heart and terror glazed his eyes as the monster bore down on him. He squeezed the last shred of power out of his bike. It was a terrible mistake.

The machine slewed into the other lane, and hurtled over the crest on the wrong side of the road. All of Max's instincts screamed warning signs

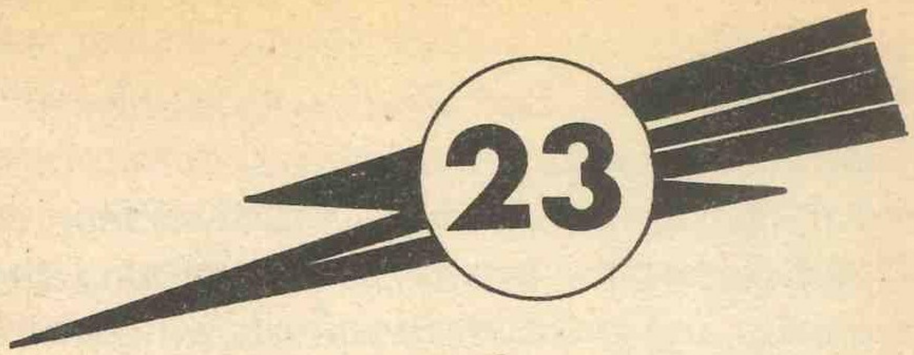
through his body — slow down. He slammed his good foot on the brake.

For the Toecutter it was a fatal error — this time his luck had run out. At better than one hundred and twenty miles an hour, laid over so his shoulder was barely off the ground, he went straight between the front wheels of a huge road rig labouring up the hill. He was still conscious for a moment, under the grille, before the sump guard ripped his head and shoulders off at the chest.

Max careered past the rig, hurtled down the hill with tyres screeching and spun to a halt in the dip. Slowly he manoeuvered the car round and climbed back towards the stationary rig. Dropping his speed even further, he pulled out to the other side of the road and crawled past, watching the stricken driver staring in disbelief at the tangle of bike and body smashed in a bloody mess beneath his prime mover.

Their eyes met briefly, then Max stood on his accelerator and tore off under the darkening sky. He was going back the way he'd come. There was one left. That was all, and then it would be done and finished with.






His leg was numb now; only the threads of pain weaving through his groin acted as a reminder of the bloody mess he'd once called a knee.

Roaring down the mountains, along the flat, past the bridge and onto the wide open plains, he noticed nothing. He was beyond fatigue, past pain now. He was racing against nightfall to find Johnny the Boy. Johnny was keeping him alive.

Max's brain, that unfailing calculator, steered him to the spot where Johnny had careered off the road. His mind called up the memory and matched it with the countryside he was travelling through.

Without realising it, he slowed the car and began to search the scrub in the failing light. Then he saw it.

There, barely 50 yards away, was Johnny's shattered machine. It lay on its side, half hidden in the scrub and the shadows. Max used his shot-gun as an improvised walking stick and, with his pistol in his hand, began to walk towards the wreckage. Despite the veil of pain which was drawn tight across his mind, his eyes searched every shrub and hillock in the vicinity for a sign of Johnny.

Slowly he approached the bike and, as he got closer, the information fell into place and his mind

printed out the result: Johnny had abandoned his bike and fled. Carefully, painstakingly, Max examined the ground for a clue which would solve the final riddle. And because he went about it with logic and patience, the solution to the conundrum unravelled before him. In the scrub he found the trampled twigs and the faint footprints which indicated, as sure as any beacon, the direction in which Johnny had gone. The trail led off at an angle from the bike, slicing up the incline and intersecting with the highway.

Satisfied with his conclusion, Max swung on one heel, dragged his other leg round with him and struggled back to his car. Almost sedately, he fired the engine and allowed the car to rumble down the highway. All the time he searched the area between the shoulder of the road and the edge of darkness for a sign of Johnny.

He found him as the sun finally set and only its afterglow was left to light the world. Johnny, unmistakable in his leathers, was clambering over what was left of a newly destroyed utility. The wreckage was barely fifty yards from the shattered guard rail. The pick-up had come to rest, on its side down and ripped apart, and Max could see from the roadway that a body was slumped out of the driver's door. Johnny was struggling to pull the boots off the body.

Max cut the engine of the pursuit special and quietly opened the door. Ignoring the pain which tore through his thigh as he clambered out onto the road, he began to move as quickly as possible



through the lengthening shadows towards Johnny the Boy, who'd happened on the wreck barely fifteen minutes before Max's arrival, and was too intent on scavenging to notice that he had company. The first he knew of Max's presence was the heavy 'click' of the pistol and the appearance of the barrel alongside his right eye.

He looked down for a moment and, with mounting panic, he saw the black, dusty boots climbing all the way up to the black jodphurs. He saw the gaping bloody hole at the knee, which was enough to make him throw his eyes upwards — past the revolver belt and the leather jacket — to come to rest on the bronze star pinned on the chest. Panic was making his mind race now. He looked straight at Max's dirt-smeared face as his mind battled to make sense out of what was happening.

"Hey, man," he said in a high-pitched, nervous voice, "this isn't what it looks like . . ."

Max stared down at him, his pistol unwavering and his nostrils growing accustomed to the bitter smell of leaking petrol.

"I just came down here to check it out," Johnny continued, "and the guy was already dead."

Slowly Max began to walk round him, cradling the shot-gun in the crook of his hand and pulling a pair of handcuffs from his waistband. Johnny tried to back away from him, but Max was too quick for him and jammed the bracelet on his ankle.

"Hey, what ya doin'? Now listen' Bronze, I ain't done nothin' wrong . . ."

Johnny's jabbering was cut short as Max began to drag him by foot towards the rear of the wreck.

"I had nothin' to do with what happened back there," he yelled as Max clipped the other bracelet around one of the steel bars which formed the side of the pick-up.

"Listen, they were a crazy lot of people . . . I'm not responsible for what happened back there . . ."

Johnny stared at Max in complete confusion as he began to rummage through the tool box he found in the cabin of the pick-up.

"Watcha doin'? What do ya think this is? I ain't been charged . . . ."

Max stopped and stared at him for a moment — as if he was noticing him for the first time — and then continued with his work.

Johnny couldn't take his eyes off him, trying to guess what was coming and falling victim every few seconds to a new wave of panic.

Max carefully collected a large tin, a hacksaw and a reel of tape from out of the box and then, taking a cigarette lighter out of his pocket, began to tape it almost at ground level to the exposed underbelly of the pick-up.

"I dunno what you're doin', Bronze, but I gotta tell ya, I'm a sick person . . . they say I'm not responsible for anythin' I do . . . "

Max worked quickly, despite the pain which was laying siege to his body.

A wild kind of anguish had crept into Johnny's voice and face. He was falling into a blind terror.

"Oh God, don't hurt me . . . "

Max flicked the lighter on and taped it so that a permanent two inch flame flared out.



Realisation began to seep through Johnny's befuddled brain. "You can't kill me," he screamed. Oh Jesus, you're mad . . . "

Max ignored his babbling and dragged his shattered leg a pace to where the petrol was streaming out of the tank in a thin line and falling on to the ground. Carefully he placed the tin underneath it and watched it slowly begin to fill. The tip of the flame was playing on the rim of the can.

Satisfied with his handiwork, he limped slowly towards Johnny, twirling the hacksaw in his fingers as he approached.

Johnny's eyes were darting between the cop who towered over him and the petrol trickling in to the can.

Max looked down at Johnny and spoke for the first time. "The chain in those handcuffs is high tensile steel. To cut through it with this," he said, holding the hacksaw out in front of him, "would take ten minutes . . ."

Johnny was staring at him with sheer, unadulterated terror now.

"How long you've got to hack through your ankle is hard to tell. But I'd say, if you're lucky, five minutes."

Johnny couldn't speak as he fought with the panic which had engulfed him. Finally his will to survive propped him up and he began to beg for his life.

"Oh God, please let me go. Oh God, you can't do this . . . "

Max threw the hacksaw down next to him, hauled his body round and began to struggle back towards his car.

Johnny was crying now, great heaving sobs wracking his body, the hacksaw lying untouched next to him.

"Please Jesus, I can't stand the pain . . . oh my God, when I was a kid, they gave me needles . . . in the night the doctors would come . . . and the pain was everywhere . . . "

Max was almost lost in the gloom of the evening, walking slowly and only the pain there to remind him that he was still alive. All the fire was gone now and he stumbled through the rubble as the great sheets of pain swamped his body and besieged his mind.

Johnny's blabbered reminiscences of a tortured childhood didn't penetrate his mind as he climbed through the broken guard rail and heaved his broken body into the car. He went through the motions of starting the car, barely able to keep fatigue at bay, and then felt the bitumen rumbling beneath his quickening tyres. The night was all around him and he swept through blackness, down one gradual slope and up the other side before he remembered to flick on his driving lights. And then, with the headlamps guiding his way and his face gently lit by the glow from the dash, there was an almighty explosion behind him. Max dragged his eyes up to the rear-view mirror and in the distance he saw a fierce orange ball lighting up the night sky behind him. He stared at it for several seconds, allowing his foot to ease off of the accelerator, and then, wrenching his eyes away, fired the car forward into the night. He didn't look back again.

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